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Auroville: Philosophy, Performance and Power in an
International Utopian Community in South India

by

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Richard Schechner
What is it that defines the human species? A nexus of circumstances: speech, bipedal locomotion, brain size and complexity, social organization. **Let me add another quality to the list, performed dreams.**


The world is now too dangerous for anything less than utopia.

Attributed to R. Buckminster Fuller
DEDICATION

For J; always my good friend
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This dissertation examines the relationship between ideals and everyday life in Auroville, an international utopian community in South India. Auroville is located in a rural area outside Pondicherry, a former French colony in Tamil Nadu. It is presently home to 1,800 people from 35 countries and aspires to one day become a city of 50,000. Several thousand local Tamil village people provide most of the labor. Based upon the teachings of the Indian political leader and philosopher, Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), Auroville was founded in 1968 by Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator, a French woman known to devotees as the Mother (1878-1973). Its goal is to facilitate the spiritual evolution of the whole planet by striving to establish human unity. Although Auroville began from nothing in a barren land, today it constitutes an important model for ecologically sustainable development. It receives significant support from the Indian government, the European Economic Union, and UNESCO.

Using a concept of “performance,” I ethnographically examine the processes through which Aurovilians collectively interpret the Mother’s direct instructions for Auroville and Sri Aurobindo’s writings in general as they go about the community’s everyday business of enacting a specific vision for a more perfect society. I look at the “social life” of central texts, and in particular the relationships of power that frame how these texts inform lectures, public meetings, ritual.
conferences, and the construction of urban spaces. In so doing I demonstrate the ways in which the ongoing formulation of Auroville’s communal identity is shaped by multiple, contradictory aspirations and realities.

In developing a performance studies approach, this work offers a new perspective for understanding the central dynamics of utopian social experiments. It also presents a unique case study for examining the ethnography of reading. Finally, Auroville is a site from which to rethink essentialist assumptions about “Indian culture” and “spirituality,” since its founders and philosophy were shaped by early processes of globalization, and because its international residents live in close proximity with rural populations, formulate visions of both regional and national forms of Indian culture, and participate in traditional Hindu practices.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCING AUROVILLE

This dissertation examines the relationship between ideals and everyday life in Auroville, an international utopian community in South India. While riddled with contradictions, the community has a remarkably long history. It is equally unique for its unusual cultural position; Auroville is the product of complex processes of globalization, even as it simultaneously bears the imprint of traditional Hindu philosophy and practice. I will examine the processes through which Auroville’s residents read, interpret, and eventually perform the written texts which form the basis of the community’s goals.

Auroville is located in what was once a remote, rural area outside Pondicherry, a former French colony in South India. It is presently home to 1,800 people from about 35 countries and aspires to one day become a city of 50,000 inhabitants. Based upon the teachings of the Indian political leader and philosopher, Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), Auroville was founded in 1968 by Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator, a French woman named Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), known to devotees as the Mother.1 Sri Aurobindo and she asserted

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1 Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to these figures as Aurovilians and many other people commonly refer to them, as Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. In the case of the Mother, some written sources in Auroville refer to her as “The Mother.”
that *homo sapiens* had to prepare themselves, both physically and spiritually, for

the advent of a more enlightened species. The role of Auroville is to serve as a kind

of crucible in this process, forging the disparate strands of human nature and world
cultures into a new way of being. With this in mind, Aurovilians² dedicate
themselves to a range of activities, including reforestation and organic agriculture,
small-scale industries, education, and art. In and around the site are many Tamil
villages, home to some 40,000 people, many of whom have provided most of the
manual labor for Auroville's development.³

Auroville began as no more than a few hundred acres of barren land,
punctuated only by the thatched mud structures of waterless villages. It would have

been tough at that time for any rational mind to conceive of any development taking
place there, let alone the technological, cultural and economic promise of an
international city. Today, more than thirty five years later, it seems hardly

surprising that no such city has materialized. More surprising, however, is that a

flourishing community exists, that money for urban development from the

Sometimes, she is written as simply, “Mother.” In conformity with standard rules
for capitalization in English, as well as the conventions adopted by the Sri
Aurobindo Archives, I will designate her as “the Mother.”
² I use the conventional way of spelling “Aurovilian” as it is used in Auroville in
most publications and brochures. I am told that this designation, with a single “I”
instead of two, came originally from the Mother herself.
³ This estimate of the population in the surrounding area corresponds to the 13
villages in Auroville's immediate vicinity (six of which fall within the city plan).
European Economic Union is pouring in, that the once infertile ground is now green with farms and a forest of trees, and that one of the most monumental, futuristic buildings in all of India stands at the center of Auroville.

Although Auroville is a place that escapes easy definition, it is a testimony to the overwhelming power of words to foment human action. I will explore the social relationships that frame the processes through which Aurovilians interpret and endeavor to enact the Mother’s specific instructions for Auroville as well as Sri Aurobindo’s more general spiritual principles in their everyday lives. The writings that inspire the manifestation of Auroville constitute a kind of “script” that guides the community’s ongoing development. People refer to these writings constantly as they collectively aspire to create Auroville and argue about the staging of a particular vision for a more perfect society. I will examine the “social life” of the essential texts and symbols that constitute the script, as expressed through performances including lectures, public meetings, rituals, conferences, and the creation of new written texts. In addition, I will explore the construction of the urban spaces in which Auroville’s destiny is to unfold.

By looking at the relationships of power that take place “behind the scenes” of Auroville’s enactment of “human unity,” I hope to understand the central aspirations and contradictions that shape the ongoing formulation of the

There are, however, 40 villages in the bioregion. Figures taken from Auroville’s
community’s collective identity. The intimate and problematic connection between texts and world-making reveals much not just about Auroville, but more generally about how people – especially those participating in a social movement or creating a community – try to live their ideals. In focusing on this connection I hope to make a unique contribution to studies of intentional and utopian communities, as well as to a greater understanding of the ethnography of reading more generally.

I also hope to contribute a unique case study to the growing body of literature about globalization and Indian culture. Auroville’s vision and current reality reflects an unusual cultural orientation. The lives and work of the figures that inspired it were shaped by colonial and postcolonial forces and life choices that involved complex routes of travel. Their philosophy reflects a process of creative appropriation and synthesis of European and Indian cultural elements, bearing witness to the ways in which Indian cultural production has been thoroughly global, long before scholars began to speak about “globalization.” The fact that Auroville is so heavily supported by the Indian government, who recognizes it as a model for ecological and social development, and that the site is so thoroughly imbedded within the economy and social networks of the greater Pondicherry area, serve to make Auroville very much a part of both regional and national Indian culture. At website, www.auroville.org.
the same time, Auroville is populated by people from all over the world. Their participation in traditional Hindu practices, as well as their complex relations with local people and Indian national leaders, contradicts essentialist ideas about India.

My work is based upon ethnographic fieldwork, the greater part of which I realized between April 2000 and October 2001. I conducted some further research during the successive summer and fall months of 2002-2004. During all of these times, my work consisted primarily of participant observation, informal conversations, formal recorded interviews, and the collection and analysis of the many written and visual materials that Aurovilians produce about the community. I offer specifics about my own relationship to Auroville in a later section of this chapter.

What is Auroville?

Auroville’s Founders

Understanding Auroville’s culture begins with recognizing the unique charisma of the two figures that have inspired it (see Figure 1). Both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother appeal to a wide-spectrum of people in part because

4 It was Max Weber who first systematically argued that social organization could be understood in relation to a special kind of legitimating authority that he called charisma, defined as “a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (1964: 358).
Figure 1: Mother and Sri Aurobindo 1950
Photo by Henri Cartier-Bresson
Courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
their writings are the product of the multicultural influences that shaped their respective lives. Although in very different ways, both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo traveled during their formative years. Their work is the result of a selective and creative appropriation from a global repertoire of images and ideas, forged in trajectories of colonialism and postcolonialism.

Sri Aurobindo is widely regarded as one of India’s greatest philosopher-sages. He is certainly among its most prolific. Born Aurobindo Ghose in Calcutta in 1872 to a father determined that his three sons would become members of the elite Indian Civil Service, he was sent with his brothers to study in England at age seven. According to his father’s wishes, he received an occidental education without any contact with the languages or culture of India. A brilliant scholar in Greek and Latin, Ghose was also well versed in French, German and Italian. After leaving Cambridge in 1892, just a year short of his graduation, he returned to India at age 21. At this time he took it upon himself to learn Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages. Ghose was thus a highly educated man committed to integrating European and Indian philosophical traditions.

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5 Biographical specifics here correspond to the official Ashram publication, “Sri Aurobindo and his Ashram” (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust 1983), cross-checked with the scholarly biography Heehs 1989. It was beyond the scope and possibility of this dissertation to conduct any research of primary documents concerning Sri Aurobindo’s life history. At the time of this writing (2004), an exhaustive biography is under publication by independent scholar, Peter Heehs, but has not yet been released.
He was also a man of worldly experience. Working for 13 years in the Secretariat of the Maharaja of Baroda and then as Vice-Principal of Baroda College, Ghose gradually developed a keen interest in the growing Indian nationalist movement. In 1906 he left Baroda and took up residence in Calcutta as Principal of Bengal National College. The period from 1906-1910 saw his transformation from "quiet scholar to fiery patriot" (Heehs 2003: 178). Ghose’s revolutionary activities and stance, explored in more detail in Chapter 6, led to a period of imprisonment while on trial for sedition, a crime for which he was later acquitted.

Ghose’s life took an abrupt turn after profound mystical experiences. In 1910 he suddenly withdrew from political life and took up residence in Pondicherry, a small French colony within Britain’s empire. Dedicating himself now exclusively to the spiritual exploration and development of consciousness, Ghose became the focal point for a small group of devotees, who through time grew in numbers. By the end of the 1920s, he was referred to by them, as well as by himself, strictly with the honorary “Sri Aurobindo” by which he is known today.6

6 “Sri” is a common honorific designation for respected men in India. According to a personal conversation I had with Peter Heehs, the foremost authority on Sri Aurobindo’s life history, “Sri Aurobindo,” as opposed to the simple nomenclature of “Aurobindo Ghose,” first appeared in print in 1920 in a journal published by an early disciple, Motilal Roy, in Bengal. The name does not appear in this way again until 1926 when in his last year before seclusion, Sri Aurobindo himself signed a couple of letters to disciples in this way, although he continued to use “Aurobindo Ghose” during the same period. At the end of 1926, two Ashram diarists make entries about “Sri Aurobindo,” without any reference as to why the change of

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It was here that Sri Aurobindo met the woman who would later become his spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa, later referred to only as the Mother. Alfassa, whose life is explored in more detail in Chapter 5, was a worldly woman who espoused radical views far ahead of her time. Born in Paris in 1878 to a Turkish banker father and well-educated, Egyptian mother – both of Jewish origin – her early years were extremely bourgeois. After attending art school, she became a highly accomplished painter. She fully immersed herself in the intellectual and cultural life of La Belle Époque, moving freely with such figures as the painter, Rodin, and the writer, Anatole France. At the same time, she had several supernatural experiences, and sought explanations from the writings of the Indian sage, Vivekananda, and texts like the Bhagavad Gita. To further develop her occult powers, she spent time studying in Algeria with an enigmatic occult master, known as Theon.

After marrying a French lawyer, Alfassa traveled to Pondicherry in 1914. Although struck by her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo, she was unable to remain in Pondicherry. With the outbreak of WWI, she and her husband returned to France.

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7 Most of the Mother’s biographical data I draw from a recent biography published by independent researcher and Aurovilian, Georges Van Vrekhem (2000). It was outside the scope and possibility for this dissertation to research any primary documents about the Mother’s life history.
and soon afterwards set sail for Japan, where they lived four years. They returned to Pondicherry in 1920 and separated soon after. Alfassa remained behind and took up residence along with Sri Aurobindo and his followers. The relationship between her and him was one of collaboration and mutual spiritual inspiration and guidance, and not one of domestic partnership. At some point in the early 1920s, Sri Aurobindo and others began to refer to her as “the Mother,” as she has been known since.

Through time the Mother set about organizing the daily life of what was growing into a full-fledged ashram, an ancient Indian residential institution for those who wish to dedicate every aspect of their life to spiritual development. When Sri Aurobindo withdrew from public life in 1926 to continue his writings in private, she was busier than ever, overseeing operations and providing guidance to many devotees at what was now known formally as the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. True in her commitment to material progress, the Mother created a self-sufficient institution characterized by organization, efficiency, and hygiene, qualities that won her admiration throughout India.

The Philosophy

The philosophy of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is very much the product of the multicultural influences that shaped their respective lives. As such, they
share something in common with another 20th century, Indian, utopian thinker, Mohandas Gandhi. Like Gandhi, as described by Richard Fox (1989), they were cultural innovators in that they disassembled existing cultural elements, juxtaposed them in new ways, and re-integrated them into new combinations.\(^8\) The Mother and Sri Aurobindo wrote extensively, formulating a scientific and spiritual vision of evolution that envisages a complete transformation of the world and the birth of a new spiritualized species. Sri Aurobindo’s vision of life, detailed in about 30 published volumes that he wrote in English, traces the evolution of the human race through anthropology, sociology, politics, psychology, culture, and religion. As such, the work represents a synthesis of Western, scientific rationalism, on the one hand, and Hindu mysticism on the other.

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy, discussed in detail in Chapter 2, begins with the premise of Brahman or the One Self that expresses itself through myriad forms. Appearing at first in the seemingly unconscious form of inert matter, it grows gradually higher towards greater perfection, first in the form of life (plants and animals), then as life with the capabilities of the mind (human beings), and eventually into something not yet manifest in the physical world, a way of being in

\(^8\) Arguing against a behavioral view of culture in which individuals always act in accordance with existing cultural understandings, Fox (1989) uses the case study of Gandhi’s invention of nonviolent resistance to demonstrate how people, operating within social networks and making use of available repertoires of cultural concepts and meanings, can “author” cultural innovations.
which full divinity can manifest known as the Supramental. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother believed that the Supramental had already begun to manifest in the physical plane and that the paroxysms of the 20th century were proof of global transformation.

While this evolutionary process is natural and inevitable, the human being can freely choose to work towards it consciously. Towards this end, both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother formulated a spiritual discipline that they called, “Integral Yoga.” In short, Integral Yoga seeks not a renunciation of life and liberation from the world but a transformation of life and the world. With an emphasis on discovery of one’s true self, called the “psychic being,” along with surrender of one’s mind to higher forces and dedication of one’s work to greater principles, Integral Yoga does not advocate specific rituals and meditative practices, like many other Indian spiritual disciplines, but gives immense freedom to the individual to pursue her inner self-development according to her nature. As the goal is to bring about a spiritual transformation of life in the material conditions of the earth, utmost importance is placed upon the material world. This takes many forms, among them seeking the perfection of the body through physical exercise, the conscious care of the material things one uses, engaging in physical labor, and seeking to cultivate an appreciation for beauty and aesthetics.
Among the many distinctive features of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s thought is the notion that is a collective effort, since the ultimate goal is not the realization of isolated individuals, but the transformation of earthly consciousness. Arguing that each individual represents a unique difficulty to be transformed and a unique aspect of the divine nature to be manifest, Sri Aurobindo stated that all kinds of people were needed for this collective yoga for humanity. The corollary to this ethos is a belief in a fundamental unity amongst all human beings. This is not, however, a unity based on uniformity, but rather one that encompasses the essential diversity of all creation.

It is in light of this need for a collective yoga that the Mother founded Auroville. Concurrent with her duties directing the Ashram, the Mother had throughout years conceived of a separate project, the establishment of a city, which unlike the Ashram, could manifest the full spectrum of human activity and through the process of collective yoga, over a long, unspecified period of time, develop a more perfect society. She established her vision for an ideal place most succinctly in her manifesto entitled “The Dream,” a text that circulates widely in Auroville and appears in many of the community’s brochures (see Appendix I).

The implications of Auroville are perceived as far-reaching. According to a message that the Mother composed for UNESCO on February 1, 1972, “Auroville is intended to hasten the advent of the supramental reality upon earth” (as quoted in
It is thus an experimental field for the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother work towards transformation of the world.

The idea is not that one must be a saint to live in Auroville. In the same way, not everyone living in the community should adhere to the same practices. As Integral Yoga allows for a free self-development of the individual, the Mother established that Aurovilians should have freedom in their way of life, although this is not to imply that people should give free rein to egoistic desires. Termed by the Mother as “the city the Earth needs,” Auroville is seen both as a microcosmic representation of the world and as a catalyst to act upon the larger macro-cosmos of creation. The exact shape of the city’s development, however, is open-ended. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother repeatedly said that the Supramental works out things in its own manner and in ways that they could not entirely predict.

In the meantime, Auroville seeks to materialize the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Official publications, meetings, and informal conversations constantly make reference to “Mother’s Dream” and the need to align all aspects of life with these teachings. For example, one of the main informational booklets about the community is entitled, Auroville: A Dream Takes Shape (AV 1995).

The multiplicity of interpretations of the texts of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, however, makes it difficult to identify any universally accepted belief system. It is easy to dismiss spiritual communities or institutions as monolithic
objects. If such places have a set of readily identifiable or publicly defined goals, it is assumed that participants’ motivations follow a single trajectory. But my fieldwork in Auroville shows that this is not true. Auroville has much in common with social movements, which as described by Arvind Rajagopal are “are systems of action, coordinating a multiplicity of beliefs and intentions” (2001: 212). Even more, to be an active resident of Auroville does not mean that a person has to believe in stated goals or principles. One can just live the Auroville life outside any particular belief or faith.9

No Aurovilian I have ever met believes that Auroville yet embodies its official goals. In general, residents, visitors and observers view the community as a work in progress, a field in which daily endeavors constitute social and material experiments to be tried, evaluated, revamped and abandoned. This dissertation will examine how some of these experiments are informed by processes of interpreting and practicing the rich repertory of concepts and aspirations that have inspired them.

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9 For a thorough deconstruction of the assumption that religious practice, as configured by anthropologists and religious studies scholars, is predicated upon belief, see Asad 1993.
Differences between Auroville and the Ashram

The question often arises in visitors' minds as to the relationship between Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, given that both were conceived as experiments in collective yoga and both have sprung from the very same philosophical root. For starters, the infrastructural differences are somewhat obvious; the Ashram is located in a few streets in the French colonial section of the middle-sized town of Pondicherry, while Auroville is spread widely in a largely rural kind of setting (see Figures 2 and 3). These obvious characteristics aside, the basic difference is that the Ashram, like all such institutions in India, provides a place for people to devote themselves entirely to yogic practice, a kind of island where one is free from the responsibilities of family and civic life. Given the emphasis Integral Yoga places on transforming the material world, this does not at all mean that Ashramites sit and meditate all day. On the contrary, they are all engaged in various kinds of work that sustain the Ashram and the industries and farms that make it a practically self-sufficient institution. In turn, they are fully supported in all their basic needs, including any extensive medical expenses, by the Ashram. They do not, however, marry and have children, and must give up their official membership if they decide to practice their yoga in the context of a householder's life. Auroville, on the other hand, is a far more dynamic place, in as much as people are not meant to be ascetics and are engaged in a very wide range
Figure 2: Main Sri Aurobindo Ashram building, Pondicherry
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Figure 3: Sri Aurobindo Ashram School
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
of activities, including many of which are research oriented. Emphasizing Auroville's open and urban nature, when asked about the difference between the Ashram and her idea for Auroville, the Mother stated on June 23, 1965, “It's a town, so it is the whole contact with the outside. And an attempt to achieve on earth a slightly more ideal life” (as quoted in AV Press n.d.: 20).

Most Aurovilians I spoke with concur that there are numerous social differences between the two places. To begin with, the Ashram represents a more solidified, hierarchical institution than Auroville, where authoritative structures are loose and often contested. Secondly, the Ashram is a more “Indian” atmosphere, in as much as most members hail from that country, many of them from parts of North India, such as Sri Aurobindo’s native Bengal. Auroville, on the other hand, is home to many people coming from Europe, North and South America and other countries of Asia. Although the majority of its residents are actually Indian citizens, most of them come from the local Tamil population, rather than from upper middle class North Indian backgrounds. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, many Aurovilians conceive of their community as an “experiment” and thus, see their own lives with an “adventurous” spirit. Generally speaking, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, they concern themselves with finding ways to put into action the Mother’s ideas about Auroville, ideas that she herself did not live long enough to oversee personally and which involve revolutionary concepts.
about the ideal society. The Ashram, in contrast, does not have the same spirit of bold discovery, since most of its organization and internal workings were well established by the Mother herself. Thus, the Ashram possesses a kind of serene and staid atmosphere of discipline, in sharp contrast with the more anarchic, creative and freewheeling environment that pervades Auroville.

Given these differences, however, on an informal level Auroville and the Ashram are in constant contact. Many of the inhabitants of the respective institutions develop close friendships. Aurovilians frequently visit the Ashram, often to meditate at the Samadhi, the site in the Ashram main building where the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are entombed. Many also make it a point to visit Sri Aurobindo’s room on the special days when it is open for devotees, such as on an individual’s birthday or Ashram holidays. In reverse, several Ashramites come to Auroville to meditate at Matrimandir, the large meditation hall under construction at the center of the community.

Physical Layout

Auroville is a place riddled with contradictions and characterized by multiple social conflicts. The physical environment in which these social dramas unfold is highly unusual. Defying conventional definitions of a city or town, it is neither an urban nor an agricultural settlement.
Auroville is located eight kilometers from Pondicherry, a former French colony within the state of Tamil Nadu in South India, and about 180 kilometers from Chennai (formerly Madras), the largest industrial center in South India and the fourth largest city in India (see Figure 4). Pondicherry (or “Pondy” as it is commonly known) has an unusual history, and one not known to most people, who naturally associate India’s colonial past with the British Raj. The French arrived in the area in 1674 under the auspices of the French East India Trading Company, establishing a few centers in the south. The Company’s director, Francois Martin, established Pondicherry as the capital of the trading posts. The British and the French were at constant odds in their desire to capitalize upon resources and trading rights, something that naturally led to armed skirmishes. In 1761 Britain captured Pondicherry, only to return it in 1763 under the Treaty of France. A few years later the French abolished the French East India Company, placing control over its outposts under direct rule of the King in 1769. The British again took the area in 1793 and again gave it back to France in 1814. After that time, the French did not cede in the face of British pressure. As the anti-colonial independence movement began to gain momentum, the French seized upon the opportunity to annoy the British by actually harboring, albeit uneasily, several Indian nationalists, Sri Aurobindo among them. When India gained independence in 1947, Pondicherry did not and remained under exclusive French control. In 1954 the colonial masters
Figure 4: Map of Auroville in relation to India
Map courtesy Auroville Foundation 2001

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finally realized a new era in which they had no part had dawned and saw fit to depart. Somewhat later in 1962 Pondicherry became a union territory, administered by a Governor who reports directly to the Central Government. Thus, it is within but separate from the state of Tamil Nadu.

Culturally, however, Pondicherry is a Tamil town, but with a French twist, making it an atmosphere wholly unique in India (see Figures 5 and 6). The old part of town, where the Ashram is located, is home to French colonial architecture, which stands along streets with French names, such as Rue de la Marine and Rue de Saint Louis. There are several French institutions in town, among them the French Consulate, the Lycee Francais, the Librairie Romain Rolland, and a prestigious scholarly institution called the French Institute. Some Tamil people do speak French, and several have relatives who reside permanently in France. A group of citizens and their descendents who fought for the French in WWII receive French pensions under their special designation as “soldats” (soldiers). As for French citizens themselves, several live in Pondicherry and many more come as tourists. Occasionally, one sees French film crews on the ground, creating features and documentaries for circulation in France. Given that the monumental figure of the Mother was herself French, and that the Pondicherry area was long under French administrative and cultural influence, it is not surprising that many people who
Figure 5: Pondicherry
Photo by Joy Postcards
Fête Nationale de France

Figure 6: Pondicherry parade
Postcard, photographer unknown
come to Auroville to reside or visit are also French. Pondicherry’s current population totals 973,829.10

Leaving Pondicherry and heading some ten minutes by motorbike north on the main East Coast Road that runs along the Bay of Bengal to Chennai, one approaches the turn-off to Auroville, which is marked only by a small sign (see Figure 7). Once the turn off is taken, one must travel up a long stretch of partially paved road, passing village dwellings, small shops that cater to visitors, and cashew fields before entering what is Auroville-held land, which is again not indicated in any obvious way.

In fact, the community is difficult to locate even when one is standing in the midst of it. It is a common occurrence for visitors to stop a local along the main, tree-lined artery that runs the circumference of the community and ask, “Where is Auroville?” This confusion of place is due to several factors. To begin with, the community does not occupy a continuous area, but is sprawled over 3,154 acres,11 punctuated and bifurcated by private properties, government roads, and Tamil villages (see Figure 8). This is in part because Aurovilians were slow to purchase the local lands necessary to complete their proposed urban plan early on when

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10 Estimate according to 2001 Indian National Census. See www.censusindia.net/t_00_005.html.
11 Figure as of April 2001, courtesy Land and Estate Management Group, Auroville.
Figure 7: Views of the Auroville entrance from main ECR Road
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
Figure 8: Map of Auroville
property in the area was relatively inexpensive. Now acquiring needed land requires complicated negotiating and pleading with shrewd developers. The population pressures of India are constant and severe. The outer limits of Pondicherry have grown closer and closer towards Auroville and Auroville has little room to expand. It is also easy to not know if one is in Auroville or not because residential settlements, work and industrial zones, and areas of agricultural production are interspersed with open spaces and trees.

Connecting roads are largely unpaved (see Figure 9). During the monsoon season in October and November many are flooded or dangerously muddy. For much of Auroville’s history bicycles were the major mode of transport. In recent years the motorcycle has gained the upper hand, a fact that many Aurovilians are not happy about. A few Aurovilians even own private cars. Given the heat, the long distances between destinations, and the absence of regular public transportation throughout the day and to many locations, it is unlikely that the situation will change soon. An example of how difficult it is to get things done in Auroville is the fact that a proposal for some kind of a bus service has been on the table for years but its implementation has been hampered by the various conflicts surrounding the development of principle roads in Auroville (see Chapter 7), coupled with the relative lack of population to make such infrastructure a compelling priority.
Figure 9: Auroville road
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
As a visitor arrives for the first time at the intended center of the community, she may be surprised by the Matrimandir temple under construction because it bears no resemblance to anything else one might expect to find in this largely rural landscape, or in any Indian city (see Figure 10). Matrimandir, a work in progress for over thirty years, is a towering dome-shaped structure covered with a layer of large, golden disks that gleam brightly in the sunlight. Meaning literally, “Temple/Pavilion of the Mother,” Matrimandir is not a typical Hindu temple where rites are conducted in the propitiation of deities, but rather is a multi-room meditation hall, the design of which the Mother saw in detail in a series of visions. Following the Mother’s statements that Matrimandir was to be a symbol of the collective aspiration for the divine, many Aurovilians see the building as the spiritual soul of the community and place great importance upon its completion (see Chapter 5). Its construction has been the focus of much conflict. In 2002 the situation climaxed to a point where rival factions practically brought work to a standstill.

Radiating outwards from the Matrimandir temple, Auroville’s residents live in 95 settlements, which they refer to as “communities.” These communities reflect Auroville’s values, with names like “Adventure,” “Aspiration,” “Prarthna (Prayer),” and “Fertile.” Here housing falls along a spectrum from entirely private dwellings to collective housing. The contrasts are stark and there is no attempt at a unified
Figure 10: Matrimandir and Gardens
Photo courtesy Joy Postcards
architectural style (see Figures 11-14). One can see luxurious villas surrounded by large, assiduously manicured gardens, as well as cement block apartments and cracker box houses. There are flying saucer like residences, of a sort that might have appeared futuristic in the 1970s, homes with village-style thatched roofs, and homes with interior patios and stone pillars in the style of traditional Tamil houses.

Public buildings are many and also eclectic in style (see Figure 15). Such places provide important opportunities for the face-to-face interaction that promotes a particular sense of community in what might otherwise be a rather diffuse everyday life. Foremost among these for the daily traffic it receives is the Solar Kitchen, a spacious dining facility that serves lunch for up to 1,000 Aurovilians and visitors six days a week (see Figure 16). The menu, entirely vegetarian, consists of fresh salads, organic whole grains, pastas, and many low-spiced versions of South Indian fare that many South Indian diners find only somewhat appealing. Like everything else in Auroville, how the Kitchen is run has been an ongoing source of contention. Most of the workers are non-Aurovilian Tamil people and there are periodic questions raised as to whether these workers are effectively managed and appropriately compensated. As for those who frequent the Kitchen, most agree that the facility has made their lives far more convenient. For many the lunch time is also a primary social time, allowing residents to catch up with one another either in regular groups that tend to eat with one another frequently, or by way of
Figure 11: Suburban-style, posh house in Samasti
Photo by Shanti Pillai
Figure 12: Invocation Apartments with waste water treatment
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
Figure 13: Duplex house with Tamil-style pillars
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
Figure 14: Hut residence in Aspiration Community
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
Figure 15: Postcard of public buildings
Photo by John Mandeen
Courtesy Visitors' Centre Postcards
Figure 16: Solar Kitchen
Photo by Shanti Pillai, 2004
prearranged and spontaneous lunch dates. The roof of the Solar Kitchen is home to a coffee shop that serves ice cream, non-alcoholic beverages and snacks throughout the day and into the evening. The spot is a favorite “smoking allowed” hangout for many younger Aurovilians. Other restaurants provide additional opportunities for nutrition and camaraderie. The New Creation Corner is especially popular amongst residents and visitors alike, known for its consistent fare of Indian and continental vegetarian and non-vegetarian eat-in and take-out. The Visitors’ Center, home to an exhibition on Auroville and boutique of the community’s many fine products, is also home to restaurant that caters to guests and residents alike.

For a community its size, Auroville boasts many meeting and performance facilities, including among them the SAWCHU Pavilion, a circular, open air space used for large residents’ meetings or concerts, and the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, a cavernous 850-seat proscenium stage used for conferences, concerts by visiting artists or speaking engagements of visiting dignitaries (see Figures 17 and 18). Finally, sports grounds constitute an important part of the public sphere of Auroville. On any day of the week, particularly at the New Creation Gym and at the entrance to a community called Certitude, one can find residents of all ages working out and playing and training for organized team sports (see Figure 19). Finally, the newly constructed Town Hall, is an important point for the centralized
Figure 17: Residents' meeting at SAWCHU  
Photo from Auroville Master Plan (AV Foundation 2001)
Figure 18: Sri Aurobindo Auditorium
Photo by John Mandeen
Courtesy Visitors’ Centre Postcards
Figure 19: Scenes from Auroville’s active sports program
Photo courtesy Jothi Govindaraj
coordination of Auroville’s many administrative, governmental and
developmental activities.

The perimeter of Auroville, known as the Greenbelt, is composed of a
forest, which is the result of one of India’s most vigorous reforestation projects with
a total of 3 million trees having been planted in the community and the wider region
(see Figure 20).\textsuperscript{12} The expansion and maintenance of this green area is a focus of
conflict. Some staunch environmental supporters, known as “Greenbelters,”
vehemently and thus far successfully, oppose plans for the community’s urban
development that would impinge on the forest. Near to the Greenbelt are farms
where fruits, vegetables, and dairy products are produced through primarily organic
means. Organic production is not easy, however, given that most local village
farmers cultivate with pesticides, including DDT, and the pests repelled by the
chemicals have a tendency to land in large numbers on organic properties. While
some Aurovilians have endeavored to promote highly effective organic farming,
most villagers remain concerned primarily with the short-term assured gains in
productivity they believe the chemicals provide. The situation is grave, as many
locals and Aurovilians fall seriously ill from the effects of DDT during certain
seasons.

\textsuperscript{12} Figure as of April 2001, courtesy Land and Estate Management Group,
Auroville.
Figure 20: View from the Greenbelt
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
Coming to Auroville

Aurovilians hail from many countries with the majority being Indian, French, German and Dutch. While some have lived in Auroville since the early days, others were either born here or have arrived recently. Many of the Indian Aurovilians have their roots in the nearby villages, home primarily to agricultural castes. In the case of those who come from far places, adventurous stories about arriving to Auroville are not uncommon. For example, I have often heard references to the “caravan” of French youth who arrived in Auroville’s early years after traveling across land from Europe.

Auroville’s multinational population raises the question of how people communicate with one another. The Mother established that Auroville should have four official languages: English, French, Sanskrit, and Tamil. Generally speaking, most official documents and meetings, as well as many day-to-day interactions take place in English, although residents possess varying levels of fluency. Those who come to Auroville with minimal or no English are highly encouraged to take classes or make use of the Language Laboratory. As of the end of 2003, new residents have also been highly encouraged to learn some of the local language, Tamil.

Becoming an Aurovilian in the official sense is not an automatic process. It requires considerable time and bureaucratic maneuvering. For foreigners, the process is more complicated given that the Indian government does not offer
residency to foreign nationals. Those who wish to join Auroville, whether from India or abroad, must first visit the community for a period of at least three months and then present themselves before the Auroville Entry Group. In the case of foreigners, it is after this initial visit and meeting that a person may request from the Group a letter of endorsement that can be taken to an Indian consulate when applying for an Entry Visa. This visa is based upon a special status that recognizes members of Auroville as “voluntary workers.” For Indians, the Entry Group still must give approval to begin the process for becoming Aurovilian.

Upon arrival in Auroville after the initial three-month visit, an applicant enters into a two-year trial period during which time one is considered to be a “Newcomer.” As a Newcomer, one is expected to be fully self-supporting in one's living expenses, and to pay (as of September 2004) Rs. 1,500 monthly ($33 US) to the community’s Central Fund.\(^\text{13}\) This is in addition to a one-time sum of Rs. 8,000 ($178 US) required of foreigners and 4,000 ($89 US) of Indian citizens at the outset. Foreigners are also asked to deposit a refundable amount to cover a return ticket to their home country for use in the event that they are denied Aurovilian status. In special cases, exceptions are made to all of these rules.

\(^{13}\) As of September 2004, the rate of exchange was approximately 45 rupees per dollar.
Newcomers, like all Aurovilians, are expected to spend five hours a day in some productive work for Auroville and to generally immerse themselves in the life of the community. It is now also highly suggested that they enroll in the classes that provide an overview of the Auroville philosophy and Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga. Like all of Auroville’s processes, however, entry procedures and expectations for residents are a topic of debate. Of late conflict has centered on the large influx of local people seeking to obtain Aurovilian status. The situation has raised the more general question of how to evaluate whether a person applies out of true commitment to manifesting Auroville’s goals, or rather in the interest of economic gain, in the case of Tamil village people, or the chance to live a cheap, easy life, a possible attraction for those from the West.

In addition to Newcomers, Auroville receives thousands of visitors each year. Busloads of tourists from all over India arrive in the afternoons to tour Matrimandir and the Visitors’ Center. The access allowed these people to the temple, and their increasing numbers is a thorny issue for Aurovilians, many of whom question whether the building should be allowed to function as a tourist site at all. Foreign tourists comprise the second category of visitor, staying in the community for anywhere from a few days to several months. While such visitors arrive year-round, their numbers are concentrated during the European August holiday time and in the “winter” months (November-February) when the climate is
cooler. As a result, Aurovilians routinely refer to these times of the year as the “guest seasons.”

Living in Auroville guesthouses, or in house-sitting type arrangements, these visitors are an important source of revenue for the community because they are required to pay a daily quota of Rs. 60 ($1.33 US), Rs. 30 for students (.67 US), to the Central Fund, in addition to substantially higher prices for goods and services. Some guests contribute in other ways also, such as through work or expertise offered in various Auroville endeavors. For the most part, guests staying in Auroville are allowed to participate in all aspects of community life, with the exception of limited visiting hours to Matrimandir and occasional exclusion from community meetings about sensitive topics.

There are, however, few organized activities for these visitors. Discovering this, some feel that the atmosphere is sometimes inhospitable. Many Aurovilians themselves are quick to admit understanding why guests may feel this way. The fact is that a number of residents resent having to constantly answer questions about their lives and, in the words of one informant, having to feel “like living in a zoo.”

*Everyday Life*

Daily life varies greatly from individual to individual. Some people are caught up in all-absorbing passions, whether it is professional work, helping to
organize and administrate the community, some form of material experimentation (such as with construction components or organic food processes), or artistic creation. Others seem apparently less occupied and are even often accused by other Aurovilians of loafing.

Generally speaking, the pace of life in Auroville is not at the break-neck speed of a big city. People make time for one another and for a variety of interests. For example, given that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo emphasized the perfection of the body, many people exercise or participate in organized sports activities, hatha yoga or martial arts. Moreover, since the Mother conceived of Auroville as a place of “unending education,” many people actively seek to refine themselves in many areas, taking advantage of the large number of classes offered in the community by visitors or residents on topics as wide as flower arranging, music performance and appreciation, and computer graphic design.

Of surprise to many visitors is that the Mother never prescribed any so-called “spiritual practices” for Aurovilians. This relates to the philosophy that espouses that “all life is either consciously or subconsciously a Yoga” (Aurobindo 1999: 2). Consequently, unlike the practice in many ashrams, there are few group meditations, or rituals in which most residents are expected to participate. People engage in spiritual activities, such as sitting in the Matrimandir meditation chamber, on their own and as they like, or not at all. Regular group activities occur on a
relatively small scale. For example, people come together to read Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, *Savitri* (1972b), or to study his teachings.

While some people are regarded as loners, most Aurovilians have an active social life. For some, close interaction takes place primarily with others of the same nationality or who speak the same language. There is definitely a sense on the part of many residents that sometimes these groups become a bit exclusive. I have often heard comments on the order of, "the French stick together," or "the German crowd." With respect to Tamil Aurovilians, social patterns are naturally different as most have family living in the region with whom ties are still maintained. While several Tamilians are active members of the community and circulate amongst many of its circles, outside of work many do socialize primarily with other Tamil Aurovilians or else non-Aurovilian family members. This is hardly surprising, given that most other Aurovilians do not speak Tamil and relatively few express interest in local culture (see Chapter 6).

Some Aurovilians view "North Indians" as a clearly defined group within Auroville as well. Residents who hail from this region of the country tend to be well-off and educated. While distinct culturally and linguistically from Europeans, their class status separates them clearly from most Tamilians. Also at play is the fact that Indians generally view "North" and "South" as a clear cultural divide in the nation. Thus, Shakti, herself a North Indian, once characterized Auroville's
social dynamics to me in 2000 as constituting an inverted triangle, with Europeans and North Indians occupying the poles at the top, and Tamilians in the inferior position. Each group, she alleged, was somewhat exclusive and represented different interests. While several Aurovilians might agree with this, many others would probably disagree on the principle that Auroville is a place in which to rise above such petty distinctions en route to creating a more universal identity.

As for favorite pastimes, weekend parties, complete with drinking and techno and hip-hop music, are a common occurrence. Gossip is an even more popular diversion. Like in any village or small community, people take great interest in one another’s private lives. Rumor is an important source of both entertainment and indirect social sanction. Even so much as being seen riding with someone on a motorcycle can perk curiosity and start stories. Avoiding participating, either as a listener and/or an object of gossip is near impossible as privacy is a rare commodity. Most people live in close proximity to each other and see one another in the same public spaces on a routine basis.

Although many people are quick to cite quotations in which the Mother or Sri Aurobindo state that sexual intercourse is not conducive to spirituality and that ultimately one must transcend such impulses when ready, sex is an important part of life in Auroville. It can take the form of stable domestic arrangements, multiple sexual partners, illicit relationships, or in the vehement denial of sex’s significance.
However, contrary to what a young European or American might expect from a progressive community, the atmosphere in Auroville is rather homophobic, in as much as there are few openly gay people. Moreover, feminism, in the American activist sense, is not an issue. Respected patriarchs often occupy leadership roles, and heterosexual metaphors for community, such as "the family," are not contested. This is not to say, however, that women are at all subservient or expected to restrict their activities to the domestic sphere. Many women hold responsible positions and professions and are the proprietors of some of the most successful businesses. Several of the women who come to Auroville from North India are highly educated and assertive. They often exercise a degree of sexual freedom that one would find in few other places in India. The situation of these women stands in contrast to most Tamil women who join Auroville. These local women are generally not well educated and the proximity of their families in the village makes independent action difficult.

Any description of daily life in Auroville is incomplete without some statement about the community's youth. Given the natural setting, many people regard Auroville as an ideal safe and free environment for young children. This outlook has grown as Auroville's school system has expanded and solidified. Based on the Mother's ideas for an integral development of the individual, free from the hierarchies and goal-oriented mentalities of exams and diplomas, children
learn not only the standard educational curriculum, but also have opportunities to study many languages, art forms and receive physical education in a beautiful facility under the tutelage of dedicated teachers. The situation becomes more

14 Because of the vastness of the topic, I have decided not to focus much on education in this dissertation, something which is a necessity but also regrettable. The Mother had much to say on the topic and put many things into place in creating and overseeing the Sri Aurobindo Institute for Education, a school in the Ashram that takes children from the beginning of their education all the way through the college undergraduate level. The Mother was concerned that children should grow up and be educated in such a way as that all of their faculties should be allowed to flower and express themselves as per their unique, individual destiny. She felt that children should develop conscious contact with their inner souls. To do this, education had to be integral. In other words, it had to develop the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual sides of a child. It also had to grant a child a great deal of freedom so that she could choose her own course of study free of conventions and the pressure of succeeding as per societal standards. At the same time, careful discipline, excellence, and concentration were to be strongly encouraged. The Mother put these principles into practice at the Ashram School by establishing the “free progress” system, whereby students advance through the school according to age cohort instead of the passing of exams. At present about one-third of the school’s students participate in this system. Classes consist of both standard curriculum, as well as individualized courses of study. Students, almost all of whom live in boarding facilities, must participate in daily, organized sports training and activities. They also study several languages, including Sanskrit and French and English, and art and music. All in all the system seems to work well, in as much as many graduates go on to higher education and/or responsible professions and successful businesses in India and Europe. The Ashram School is greatly respected by many people involved in education throughout India. While modeled on the same principles, the Auroville schools have a less established infrastructure and are a reflection of the “work-in-progress” status of most of the community’s institutions. They also face significant challenges that the Ashram school does not, namely having to integrate students who come from a very wide diversity of cultural and economic backgrounds, as well as having to operate with much more limited funds. There is also the fact, which I have gathered from teachers I have spoken with, that since Auroville is a very anti-authoritarian kind of a place, behavior in the classroom can be at times difficult to manage, much unlike the
complicated at the secondary levels, however. Many foreign parents, eager that their children should be able to proceed on to higher education outside India, send their children to expensive, international boarding schools if they have the resources to do so. This establishes grounds for sharp inequality as compared with children whose families cannot provide them with such opportunity. This situation has somewhat shifted in recent years, however, as Auroville has established the Center for Further Learning (as of 2003 newly called Future School), a secondary educational facility that prepares students for the A and O Level exams of the British system. Indian parents face similar concerns; many Tamil Aurovilians opt to send their children right from the elementary level to schools outside of Auroville where they take the necessary government exams needed to gain diplomas and advance through the Indian educational system. All the aforementioned situations bring into sharp relief the fact that the community is not yet self-sufficient. They also bring to the fore questions as to whether parents who decide to come to Auroville can expect their children to commit their own lives to the same, with all of the possibilities and limitations that such a decision implies.

extremely studious and disciplined atmosphere I have observed in the classroom at the Ashram. These challenges aside, most Aurovilians residents seem to concur that in recent years, however, the elementary level has been able to provide students with most things that most parents and teachers feel that they need. As I mention in the main body of this text, however, the same is not true for the secondary levels.
As for the extracurricular, much of Auroville's youth seem relatively carefree. Because life, even when in school, is less structured than in most of the world, young people can choose to participate at will among a wide variety of activities and can escape many of the responsibilities that they might feel growing up elsewhere. While the pressure to be something might be considerably less, the flip side is that some young people seem to lack direction and perseverance and are perceived by some as frittering away time well into adulthood. The fact is, however, that their lives are not so easy. While they may be growing up in India, many do not feel much connection to the surrounding culture, nor do they necessarily feel at home when visiting parents' native countries. Recreations for Westernized young people are relatively few in the region, although typical diversions such as drugs and alcohol are readily available. Finally, while there are chances to gain hands on experience in many unusual endeavors, opportunities to specialize or receive advanced training in any field are naturally very limited in a community the size of Auroville. It seems unlikely that such issues will vanish overnight.

_Auroville's "Culture"

Auroville prides itself on being a "universal township." In tribute to the thoroughly international nature of the project, the Mother envisioned an area of
public infrastructure known as the International Zone. This area, which is in only the beginning phases of construction, is to eventually house a series of national "pavilions," to represent the true inner spirit of each of the world's nations. A central point is the Unity Pavilion, which, when completed, will house a "Table for Peace" crafted and donated by the famous architect and woodworker, George Nakashima in 1996. Already complete is the Tibetan Pavilion, whose foundation stone was laid in 1993 by the Dalai Lama, who also contributed a substantial portion of the construction costs. This pavilion hosts exhibits and cultural programs. While people in many other countries have begun discussion about their respective pavilions, it is not surprising that the only one who has advanced with construction is the United States.

Yet regardless of its plans for an International Zone, Auroville is a truly international place. With such an international population, naturally the question arises as to what are the primary cultural points of reference for Auroville's residents (see Table 1). Thinking about it differently, one might wonder to what extent the intercultural nature of social interactions propels the emergence of a uniquely "Aurovilian" culture. The question is not purely academic, as it is one that concerns some Aurovilians as well, although from varying perspectives. For example, once when I explained to an informant that I was interested in the ways in which Aurovilians were seeking to formulate a new kind of culture, the person
TABLE I: AV POPULATION BY NATIONALITY 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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expressed doubt about the validity of my question, exclaiming, “Well, this is not the place to look at in that way, because that idea of culture belongs to the old world and we are trying to go beyond it.” This viewpoint is interesting, as many academics in the social sciences might take for granted that identity formation relies on debates about culture. In Auroville, many people privilege the philosophical texts as the guides for their personal and group behavior. Other Aurovilians do seem to see things from this perspective. For example, an issue dedicated to artistic production in the monthly periodical, *Auroville Today* (hereafter designated as *AV Today*), raises the point that “something specifically ‘Aurovilian’ in artistic expression may be in the first stages of birth” (*AV Today* 2001: 2). Whether or not the statement is accurate, it does reflect the interest on the part of some people to think about the realization of the objectives of Auroville not solely in physical or structural terms, but also in terms of cultural production as well.

One of the salient features of life in Auroville is the meeting and/or collision of elements of local and national Indian culture with Euro-American traditions and practices. Many Indian and non-Indian Aurovilians assert that Auroville’s social environment is “Western,” in spite of its geographic location and the fact that the largest percentage of its population is from India. Indeed, codes of dress, language, modes of work, and products are influenced largely by Western...
At the same time, most Aurovilians interact with Indians on a daily basis, either with other Aurovilians, hired workers or domestic servants, shopkeepers, or local bureaucrats. On a community level, Auroville is constantly negotiating with and/or entertaining local, regional, and central government officials and institutions. All of these relationships are complicated. They also immerse many Western Aurovilians, in some cases directly, in others only marginally, in the stream of Indian cultural practices. For example, although the Mother and Sri Aurobindo never advocated the propitiation of any deity, many Western Aurovilians decorate their homes with pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses and may adorn favorite images with flowers (see Figure 21). Others may study Indian dance forms or actively follow (and occasionally involve themselves) in Indian politics. As a result, Auroville is a site from which to examine the perceptions that Westerners have about India and the processes through which they select and incorporate certain Indian cultural elements into their “spiritual” and mundane practices.

Thus, Auroville demands rethinking “Indian culture” and Indian “spirituality” from the perspective of transnational flows of values and images. It
Figure 21: An Auroville Ganesh in Aspiration
Photo by Shanti Pillai 2004
is a place that can only be understood as a position within a global economy of traveling concepts and symbols, which are transformed abroad by a cross-cultural pool of interpreters, and then re-instated at sites of origin. Aurovilians are part of the wider phenomenon of growing numbers of people actively engaged in the production and reception of Indian culture both in and outside of the subcontinent. Each year thousands of people from the United States, Europe, Latin America, and other countries in Asia, travel to India to actively participate in pilgrimage, ashram residency, and the study and performance of music and dance. On the flip side, growing numbers of people around the world engage in spiritual practices that originate in India. Some even become authorities. All of these activities, both in and outside India, contribute to the manifold meanings that can be attributed to

15 Appadurai and Breckenridge assert that Indian modernity is shaped by both local cultural and historical trajectories and flows of images and ideologies from other sites (1995). The literature on diaspora, and to a lesser extent studies of performance, has more actively acknowledged that Indian traditions are historically contingent and responsive to global flows. Many studies highlight change to ritual practices as religion becomes a rallying point for new ethnic identities (Kelly 1991; Van der Veer and Vertovec 1991; Vertovec 1996). Scholars examining bhangra, a form of popular music combining Punjabi folk song with reggae rhythms and rap-style lyrics, point to a double identity of belonging to both India and Britain and a desire to distance diasporic identity from nostalgia (Taylor 1997). Gopinath (1995) asserts that bhangra reworks the hierarchical relation between diaspora and nation. Similar views from performance studies can be found in work on the relationship between colonialism, early twentieth century European and American artists, and the translation and revival of Indian dance (Allen 1997; Erdman 1987; Coorlawala 1992). Zarrilli’s (1998) exploration of the repositioning of the body in the martial art form, kalarippayattu, through advertising and its
Indian practices, including framing and transforming the significance that places and cultural concepts may have for specific Indian audiences as well. I assert that Auroville embodies the ways in which “India” is no longer only something geographically locatable, nor is it the exclusive domain of a readily-identifiable cultural or ethnic group.

More specifically, I hope that my work contributes to an analysis of spiritual formations that hold some relationship to a broader phenomenon identified as Hinduism, but with multicultural and intercultural dimensions. The Auroville philosophy in and of itself escapes easy definition, given the life histories of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the fact that their teachings constitute a synthesis of Indian mysticism, scientific rationalism, and British and French colonial thought. Since the formation of Auroville, an international population informed by several

performance outside India highlights how a traditional cultural practice takes on new meanings through its international circulation.

16 This study builds upon some studies about international tourism to India that demonstrate the significance that sites and historic periods come to attain for Indians through the circulation of non-Indian tourists. Edensor traces the importance that international tourism has had for the affirmation of official and subaltern narratives of Indian nationalism (1998). Ramusack examines how colonial travelers contributed to the development of post-independence tourist sites for the middle-class and the formulation of a realm of fantasy based on the era of Indian princes (1995).

17 The eclecticism of Hindu thinkers has been explored by Hatcher (1999), who highlights how the religious philosophies of particular spiritual and political leaders have been informed by their contact with non-Hindu religious thought. Similarly, Fox (1989) demonstrates how Gandhi’s non-violence was informed by both the traditional Hindu concept of ahimsa and Quaker ideas about non-compliance.
other globally circulating belief systems including the New Age movement and environmentalism, has been interpreting and practicing this philosophy in a setting that brings them into contact with elements of national Indian culture as well as locally specific traditions. Thus, Auroville constitutes a kind of postmodern Hinduism, a system of thought that eludes strict definition because it is a hybrid blend of globalized concepts and material practices.

**Economy**

Auroville’s philosophy holds that spiritual values, rather than material necessities and desires should govern both the means of production as well the distribution of wealth. As Sri Aurobindo indicates:

The aim of its [that of a spiritual society] economics would be not to create a huge engine of production, whether of the competitive or the co-operative kind, but to give to men – not only to some but to all men each in his highest possible measure – the joy of work according to their own nature, and free leisure to grow inwardly, as well as a simply rich and beautiful life for all (1997b: 257).

Neither capitalism nor communism is seen as capable of producing this desired end. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother stated that ultimately, all money was a power of the Divine. In “A Dream” the Mother elaborated on the ideal economy as follows:

In this ideal place money would no longer be the sovereign lord; individual worth would have a far greater importance than that of material wealth and social standing. There, work would not be a way to earn one’s living but a way to express oneself and to develop one’s capacities and possibilities while being of service to the community as a whole, which, for its own part,
would provide for each individual's subsistence and sphere of action. In short, it would be a place where human relationships, which are normally based almost exclusively on competition and strife, would be replaced by relationships of emulation in doing well, of collaboration and real brotherhood.

With such demanding ideals, it is of little surprise that there is a wide gap between aspirations and present conditions. For example, the Mother emphasized that there was to be no private property in Auroville. As a result, any development, construction, or resource is to belong to the community as a whole, regardless of whether or not a private party provides the funds. At present, however, things do not function in this way. Houses and businesses supposedly belonging to the collective are bought and sold, and several individuals use property very much as if it were their own. Moreover, there are vast discrepancies in the economic conditions of Aurovilians comparable to the wealth differences in other societies. On the one hand, there are those who are barely able to arrange proper shelter. On the other, there are people whose financial resources permit them to live luxuriously and travel frequently. This situation creates much discussion amongst Aurovilians, who are anxious about the challenge that it presents for a project in which the aim, while by no means to create uniformity, is to foster a form of enlightened equality. Finally, the idea is that Auroville will eventually become self-supporting. In the meantime, the Indian government contributes most of the money for development,
with international donors weighing in heavily as well. And importantly, local
villagers provide most of the labor.

There are several commercial enterprises in Auroville, known as
Commercial Units, producing products as varied as incense, clothing, and furniture,
to name but a few. While some enterprises are barely able to cover operating costs,
others have become highly successful through exports to Europe and/or the United
States. In theory, all Units are required to contribute 33% of their profits to the
Auroville Central Fund, which then allocates funds to various Auroville projects, in
addition to covering the living wage, known as a Maintenance, of those Aurovilians
working in Service Units. These Service Units provide goods and work to the
community but do not seek to earn a profit. Service Units include such activities as
health care, town planning, or education. Whether commercial businesses actually
and honestly contribute their share is a question in the minds of many Aurovilians
with whom I spoke.

As of 2004 the average Maintenance was between Rs. 3,500 and 5,000 ($78
and $111 US). Those Aurovilians who do not receive a Maintenance for their
work, either from the Commercial Unit that employs them or from the Central
Fund, are classified as Self-Supporting. Nevertheless, there are instances of those
receiving a Maintenance who simultaneously run side-businesses that provide them
with extra income, or who regularly receive income from a source in their home.
countries. Given that living in India is still much less expensive than in most other places in the world, there are also several examples of Aurovilians who live in Auroville part-time, paying for their residence with money earned in temporary or seasonal jobs in their home countries.

Many Aurovilians feel that in recent years the community as a whole has placed a greater emphasis on money. Repeatedly I would hear long-time Aurovilians claim that whereas during the early years there was a much greater feeling of collectivity, without private property and disparity of life styles, today money has become the *raison d’etre* for many individuals. Like anywhere else, there are also a few cases of people who amass wealth at the expense of the community as a whole through cheating and embezzlement. Several solutions have been put forward in the name of getting Auroville back on track and aligning the community’s development with the Mother’s instruction that money should not circulate within Auroville.

At the time of this writing a system of “Circles” had been worked out, in which volunteer participants are organized into groups for pooling income. Operating on trust, the idea behind the experiment is that individuals should be sincere in utilizing resources for things they really need and honest in sharing their income. Not surprisingly, many of the participants in the experiment are those with fewer resources and the Circles are subsidized by one of Auroville’s largest
Commercial Units. Nevertheless, as time has gone on, some of the circles have become quite successful and are regarded as having been beneficial to all participants.

Naturally, none of the construction of Auroville or creation of its major institutions could be accomplished without funds. Therefore, fundraising is an important priority and an activity that engages the energies of several people. The Project Coordination Group (PCG) oversees major efforts, evaluating proposals submitted by groups and individuals who spearhead particular projects in the interest of the community as a whole. PCG evaluates whether the needs outlined by any particular proposal are indeed valid, weighs them against others and then channels them to the appropriate source of funding. Not surprisingly, people may contest the grounds on which decisions are made.

Aside from the Indian government, which is Auroville’s largest source of funds, outside finance comes regularly by way of a handful of private foundations, such as the Foundation for World Education (FWE) in the United States, and Stichting Desir in the Netherlands. On a much larger scale, money for specific endeavors has come from high-profile international donors. For example, the Visitors’ Center, which was conceived in part to demonstrate appropriate building technology and renewable energy, was funded by the United Nations and the German government.
Alternatively, fund raising campaigns are launched which target Auroville’s international friends and supporters. These efforts are often coordinated along with the network known as Auroville International (AVI), which has offices in several countries throughout the world. The most ambitious of the current fundraising initiatives is aimed at obtaining the funds for acquiring the land needed to complete Auroville’s plan. According to a brochure, only 45% of the land comprising the body of Auroville has been purchased to date. The situation is critical as rapidly rising appreciation and speculation threaten to put lands beyond reach. Moreover, savvy developers, with an eye to the oasis effect of Auroville’s greenery and relative quiet, are on the move to purchase lands themselves, put up apartments and market them to middle and upper-middle class buyers from nearby Pondicherry, which is growing by leaps and bounds and becoming more crowded and polluted by the year. Thus, while Auroville may be like no other place on earth, its growth on a concrete, material scale is very much linked to developments taking place around it, as well as to the availability of outside sources of financial support.

Organization

Like its economy, Auroville’s organizational structure has been a work-in-progress from the beginning as the community has tried to find a way to manifest
its ideals. According to the Mother, one of the hallmarks of the ideal society is the governing principle of "divine anarchy." She once explained, "The anarchic state is the self-government of each individual, and it will be the perfect government only when each one becomes conscious of the inner Divine and will obey only Him and Him alone" (1981b: 76). The inner Divine that the Mother refers to is the soul, or "psychic being." She believed that when people eventually became fully conscious of it, to the point where it directed all their activities in the world, they could "organize themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws" (1980a: 225). Since present day political organizational models are built around the consciousness of the mind, they easily become fossilized and corrupt and incapable of meeting needs. A spiritual consciousness, on the other hand, is fluid and constantly adapts itself to changing conditions. An ideal organization would automatically lead to a spontaneous and flexible order, in which each individual would find her place, without any compromise of individuality.

The community is currently organized around several "groups" which coordinate activities for specific areas. Assuming the most comprehensive responsibilities is the Working Committee (WC), charged with representing all the communal interests of the community to outside parties. As of 2002 a new body, the Auroville Council, was created to deal with matters affecting the internal functioning of the community, including making and coordinating policies and
resolving disputes amongst residents. Also important to governance are the Auroville Planning and Development Council, which evaluates land use issues, directs urban planning and gives permission for any construction, the Housing Group, which allocates funds towards maintaining existing residences and assists those without financial means with construction costs, and the Entry Group, in charge of admitting people into the community. The Funds and Assets Management Committee oversees the utilization of funds, the sale and utilization of assets, and taxes.

The process through which Aurovilians are selected to serve in these groups depends upon each group itself. For some groups, it is simply a question of coming forward and indicating one’s interest in participating. For the Working Committee and Council, however, the process is more formal. In 2002 nominations were accepted from throughout the community. The top 50 nominees decided amongst themselves who would serve in the Working Committee and Council. These candidates were then ratified by the Residents Assembly, in which all residents over age 18 are eligible to vote.

In spite of formal procedures, however, the authority invested in any one of these groups is thin and can be contested at any time. Moreover, no one body is granted absolute power to enforce any of the decisions taken. This both prevents abuses of power and hinders development and the completion of projects.
As for Auroville’s formal status within India, the community’s relationship with the Indian Central Government in New Delhi underwent a radical change in the late 1980s in light of the resolution of a long, acrimonious dispute over the governing of Auroville. After the Mother’s death in 1973, responsibility for Auroville fell into the hands of the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), an organization separate from the Aurobindo Ashram, which promoted the teachings of Integral Yoga and solicited funds throughout India. Many Aurovilians objected to the mandates of the SAS, on grounds that the organization’s members mismanaged funds, had grandiose visions that did not fit on-the-ground realities, and generally sought too much control. In the minds of some people I spoke with, the conflict of interest was generational as well as cultural; most of the individuals representing the SAS were older, conservative Indians, while the Aurovilians were a largely rebellious, young bunch of Westerners. Several conflicts ensued. Some of these struggles turned violent. In particular in August 1977 local police intervened and arrested several Aurovilians when a protest turned into a riot. Seeking to protect the integrity of the Auroville project from outside influence, a group of Aurovilians sought to place the community directly under Central Government control. In 1980 a Supreme Court decision did exactly that. It was followed with a formal, bureaucratic arrangement in 1988, when the Auroville Foundation Act was
unanimously passed by both houses of Indian Parliament, permanently placing Auroville under the purview of the State.19

The Act establishes a Residents' Assembly, composed of all residents over 18 to organize the various activities of Auroville, representing itself to the Governing Board through the liaison of the WC. The Governing Board consists of 6 members, in addition to a Secretary and Chairman appointed in Delhi in the Human Resources Ministry. It is the Board that has the overall responsibility for the proper management and development of Auroville. The Board co-ordinates activities in consultation with the Residents’ Assembly, reviews policies and gives directions for future development. It does this in consultation with an International Advisory Council of “eminent persons” who act as advisors. As such, the Board wields much power.

Many Aurovilians I know feel ambiguous about any involvement of the government, however. They fear that State control could at any point jeopardize the integrity of the project. At the time of the writing of this dissertation (2000-2004), the attitude had shifted somewhat. From 1999-2004, the post of Chairman of the Governing Board was held by Kireet Joshi, a former aide to the Minister of

19 For a detailed account of this resolution and the debates that surrounded it about the Indian state’s definitions of “religious,” “spiritual,” and “secular,” see Minor 1998.
Education under Indira Gandhi, and a long-time Sri Aurobindo devotee. Joshi provided some residents with an assurance that the person occupying the pivotal role of Chairman would be acting in sympathy with the philosophy and goals of Auroville. Some residents, however, were, and continue to be, mistrustful of Joshi’s views and/or uneasy about the reverential, guru-like manner accorded him by many Aurovilians.

Auroville’s official organizational structure aside, it is difficult to identify a single, cohesive force behind the community. Developments are fueled by the rise and fall of shifting factions of power who manage to invest themselves for periods of time with the authority to interpret the philosophy of the founders in order to mobilize resources to secure their own vision of what the community should be.

Concepts about spirituality can be instrumental in fostering particular agendas. People mobilize spiritual ideals and philosophical precepts to further efforts aimed at controlling economic resources or the direction of future developments. The interests and resources at stake, however, are not always material. Power in Auroville can be a bid for authority based on spiritual prestige.

Kireet Joshi, is a good case in point, as in virtually all of his public appearances he offers at least one vignette of an experience he had with the Mother (see Chapter 3). These reminiscences usually seem to affirm the closeness of that relationship, something that is then interpreted by many Aurovilians as either a sign
of Joshi’s sincere sympathy for Auroville, or as a proof of his ability to understand better than others what the Mother had in mind. Thus, at least some social actors in Auroville are operating within a kind of spiritual marketplace, where they compete to accumulate prestige, celebrity, or honor based on the unequal distribution of spiritual knowledge or experience. At the same time, because of Auroville’s loose organizational structure, it is difficult for any individual or faction to consolidate power for any length of time. The meaning of the utopian promise of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is contested terrain and consent is contradictory and never complete.

In short, Auroville is a community difficult to characterize because of its diverse population, divergent views on everything from life style to governance, and the varied pursuits in which people are engaged. Ideally a place of peace, Auroville is awash with conflicts that are a salient feature of all levels of daily life. As one friend put it, “Ask two Aurovilians for their opinion on any subject, and you will get two entirely different opinions, and probably even a fight!” While disputes are often bitter, however, many residents manage to maintain an admirable sense of humor. There is also an atmosphere of “adventure,” and, whether warranted or not, a feeling that the community is “pioneering” a new way of life. For a skeptical visitor, the importance that some Aurovilians attribute to the community’s role in the future of humanity is tempered by what seem like obvious inconsistencies.
Nevertheless, one of the many contradictions of Auroville is that no matter how many doubts one may harbor, it is a place that is physically beautiful and socially unique.

The Significance of the Auroville Case Study

Thinking About "Community"

Auroville provides an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the symbolic and imagined dimensions of modern social life, on the one hand, and the immediacy and concreteness of ongoing social relations, on the other. In recent years scholarly thinking about community have been influenced in great part by Benedict Anderson’s (1983) ideas about the role of the imagination in allowing people to envision that they belong to a collective that exceeds the boundaries of daily, face-to-face interactions. While invaluable for explaining communal bonds,

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20 As argued by Vered Amit, one of the hallmarks of the anthropological construction of community has been a move towards emphasizing its conceptual and qualitative aspects, as opposed to social interaction and structures (2002). Among the implications of this perspective has been a tendency to prioritize the symbolic aspects of collective identity over actual social relations.

21 It was Benedict Anderson (1983) who all but eliminated the relevance of face-to-face interaction for the analysis of collective identity. In his examination of the rise of allegiances that formed the basis of nationalism in 16th century Europe, Anderson sought to demonstrate how the dissemination of print capitalism allowed people living over a wide area and unknown to one another personally to feel as though they were all members of the same collectivity. His emphasis on the “imagination” of solidarity has been highly influential, in particular for scholars concerned with how global travel, technology and economics have decoupled
especially in an increasingly global world. Anderson’s concepts cannot account for the strength of the emotional attachment that people feel for specific places. Moreover, the idea of “imagination” divorces people’s thinking about community from their actual daily experience of it. In contrast, an emphasis on everyday life leads to an analysis that recognizes that people do not just imagine community, but create, affirm, and contest it through concrete, ongoing social relationships. My work on Auroville postulates a dialogical relationship between official or hegemonic narratives about a particular identity and the actual social relationships and daily activities that are both informed by those wider ideas and creative of them. I seek to understand how Aurovilians go about formulating their collective identity, by not only examining the public discourses about that identity, but also by finding out how individuals feel about their participation in Auroville, and how they construct through social relationships, both inside and outside Auroville, their unique sense of belonging to the community. Being an Aurovilian may be an abstract concept, but at the same time it has its roots in the ongoing construction of social consciousness from the experience of day-to-day interaction and locality. The move towards formulating a disjuncture between collective identity and place has been spearheaded more recently by Appadurai, who builds upon ideas about “imagination” in his examination of the phenomenon of “deterritorialization,” and displacement (1996).

As argued persuasively by Herzfeld (1997), Anderson’s macro-level approach cannot account for the intense emotion that people may feel for their imagined communities and suggests that scholars must not lose sight of the importance of
Auroville is especially interesting because it represents a specific kind of place that one might not think of in the context of India. Auroville belongs to the unique and highly varied set of utopian collectives, or as they are more commonly referred to today, “intentional communities,” a term which emphasizes that the social bond amongst residents is based upon their conscious choice to uphold specific principles or objectives. While thought of as anomalous or, at least, against the grain of societies at large, there is actually a long history of utopian thought and settlement. A very early conception of an ideal place is detailed in Plato’s *Republic* (2000), in which he envisioned an ideal Greek state with communal living amongst the ruling classes. Most notably, the name “utopia” itself is associated with Thomas More and his novel of the same name, written in 1516. More conceived of “utopia” as a kind of play upon the Greek words (Mumford 1922). “Eutopia” means the good place, while “outopia” means no place. As such, Moore referred to what he saw as the human capacity to dream of possibilities outside current realities, even if these possibilities seemed impossible to attain. As for early examples of actual communities oriented around ideals, one

everyday life for people’s sentimental and embodied experience of collective affiliations.

can think of the communal living developed in monasteries in early and medieval Christianity, as well as in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Asia.

From the perspective of recent history, when one thinks of communities founded on utopian ideals, or social experiments in collective living, one might first call to mind the communities that have existed in the West, particularly the United States, throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. People created such places often in reaction to urban growth and industrialization, emphasizing instead the bonds of face-to-face community and a withdrawal from society at large. Within these general parameters, communities have had a wide range of motivations, many of them quite radical and some similar to the aspirations of Auroville. The motivations behind many of the experiments of the 1800s found their roots in religion, or alternative beliefs about human nature. Most well known of the religious variety were the settlements of the Shakers, a Christian sect found in England in 1758 that came to the United States seeking religious freedom in 1774 (see Stein 1994). Traveling throughout New England accruing converts, by the 1830s the Shakers had founded some 20 communities where people lived together with a commitment to common property, celibacy, equality of the sexes, and the profession and cleansing of sins. Another experiment with alternative religious beliefs at its root was the Oneida community, founded in the 1850s in Madison County, New York (see Pitzer 1997). Based on “bible communism,” its residents
shared a belief in “complex marriage,” in which they married the entire group, as opposed to a single partner. Sharing all responsibilities, they lived, ate and reared children all together.

Another important communal experiment, although not religious in orientation, was founded in New Harmony, Illinois in 1825 (see Fogarty 1990). Inspired by well-educated, charismatic leader, Robert Owen, the community was committed to finding a way of living sustainably without money (an aspiration shared by Auroville). This goal that eluded them and the community disintegrated after several years. Another significant non-religious society was the Brook Farm Community (see Francis 1997 and Traugot 1994). Based on the transcendentalist movement’s value placed upon the individual and self-reliance, the community was an effort to put “plain living” into practice at West Roxbury Massachusetts on some 200 acres of land from 1841-1847. A dynamic place, it attracted many luminous intellectuals of its day, including transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Walt Whitman and Melville. Like Auroville, the Brook Farm society attempted to provide for all of the needs of its members, including primary through the highest levels of education.

While many think of the 18th century as being the heyday of such experiments, Hicks argues that significant movements continued into the early and mid 20th centuries, although they have received little attention (2001). Most
importantly, the community of Celo, which flourished in the rural south during the 1930s, 40s and 50s, was again an effort on the part of well-educated people to rebuild the world on a smaller scale. Sounding much like Auroville as Hicks describes it, Celo’s mission was to provide people with a place in which to make a living without comprising their convictions and love of nature. It was also to allow people to develop themselves mentally and spiritually. Later in the 20th century, the hippy communes founded by youth of the 1960s came into being. These were less about building a new world, so much as they were about rejecting specific values of the dominant society (Fairfield 1971; Traugot 1994). Noteworthy among these was Morning Star Ranch, a California commune of the late 1960s, which survived only for a few years (Hine 1966). Founded by Lou Gottlieb, a well-educated musicologist and folk singer, its residents, valued anarchy, although not at all the ordered anarchy described by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Morning Star, allowed for an “anything goes” lifestyle, which included group yoga, macrobiotic food, marijuana, classical music rehearsal and public nudity.

Among their commonalities, what unifies many of these attempts throughout past centuries is that few succeeded in realizing their goals for any length of time. Lack of resources and institutions, and weak consensus amongst residents about communal goals brought about the demise of many experiments
(Kanter 1972). This has not, however, deterred people from dreaming up new ways of conceiving and reaching a more ideal society.

Today, in part in response to the isolating effects of modern life, growing numbers of people are opting to experience life in an intentional community. At present such places exist in many countries, and include the kibbutzim of Israel, and communities in Australia, Latin America, Japan, and throughout Europe and the United States.$^{24}$ In addition, with the advent of the virtual age, there are now numerous utopian “nations” where residents pursue their alternative visions of society and assume the multiple roles of citizenship on-line.$^{25}$

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$^{24}$ The range of motivation behind such places is wide. To cite but a few known examples: Arcosanti in Arizona is dedicated to building a prototype structure based on the vision of architect Paolo Soleri (Fellowship for Intentional Community 2000: 202). The various Camphill communities scattered throughout the United States, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland are therapeutic in nature, providing a space for adults with mental and emotional disadvantages to live and work with co-workers and children (212-215). The Federation of Damanhur in Italy functions as a federation of various communities with over 800 citizens, who have their own political structure, economic activities, currency and daily paper. The Federation is an international spiritual center for “research” into sustainable living and meditation (229). Heartwood Community in New Zealand organizes its population into extended households, where people share work but retain their own incomes, independent lifestyles and beliefs (262). Huehucoyotl in Mexico was founded by artists and ecologists from different countries and presently attempts to live a simple rural lifestyle while seeking a harmonious blend of traditions and cultures, including that of the local area (267). The Ittoen Foundation in Japan is a community of people “who seek to live a life of having no possessions and giving service to others in a spirit of penitence” (270). Lothlorien in Brazil is concerned with holistic living and naturopathic healing (288).

$^{25}$ For a description of the phenomenon of virtual utopias, see Blumberg 2003.
Many of the present day intentional settlements, including one of the oldest, Findhorn in Scotland, which was founded in 1962, have as their objective a combination of spirituality and environmental concern. Often such places hope to achieve a way of life that is environmentally sound. For example Acorn Community in Virginia, emphasizes a rural, farming lifestyle for sustainable living. In contrast, the not yet manifested Walden Three Project projects a model for luxurious living in a car-free, super-efficient city, which emphasizes permaculture and recycling. Several communities aim to help individuals to develop themselves by drawing upon an eclectic range of cultural resources (Pepper 1991). For example, Ananada Farm in California, a community that began in the late 1960s is based upon the syncretic, Hindu teachings of Swami Paramahamsa Yogananda. Thus, the life of many intentional communities is informed by primary concepts of the New Age Movement (see Heelas 1996; Ross 1991).

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26 Findhorn is dedicated to the proposition that “a joyful, loving, and sustainable future on Earth will require changes in the way that we has humans relate to ourselves, other people, the natural environment, and the spiritual dimension of life” (Fellowship for Intentional Community 2000: 248). The community is perhaps most known for its highly successful alternative agriculture that includes amongst its methods soliciting the cooperation of natural spirits, fairies, etc. The community receives many visitors each year and conducts numerous organized educational programs.

27 See www.ic.org/acorn

28 See www.walden3.org
It is obvious that Auroville has much in common with other social experiments past and present. The creation of a place that allows for spiritual development, and values nature, self-sufficiency, collective living, freedom, and more recently, multiculturalism, is nothing new. At the same time, there are many things about Auroville that make the place utterly unique. First of all, there is the surprising fact that the community has flourished in a relatively marginal region of India. Secondly, its population is thoroughly international. Thirdly, residents interact closely with a local population that is markedly different in terms of culture and class. Lastly, and by no means least, Auroville has steadily grown from its inception. It shows no sign of disintegrating any time soon. Perhaps it is because it is so unique and successful that within the international circuit of communities, many of which are in some form of contact with one another, Auroville is respected as a place that has managed to survive against tremendous odds. As I have gathered from numerous conversations with visitors to Auroville who have traveled to other communities or live in places such as Findhorn, Sirius (located in Massachusetts), or Arcosanti (in Arizona), Auroville is seen as a kind of tribute to the potential of alternative visions of social life.

Given Auroville’s importance, it is surprising that academic studies of the community are few. In fact, book-length, scholarly studies of Auroville do not exist. Auroville has been the subject, however, of unpublished master’s theses
written in English by a handful of European graduate students who have lived for varying periods of time in the community. Such works are of interest, because as one of the authors, Toby Butler, points out, most writing about social and spiritual movements and places tends to focus on founders and philosophy, rather than the practices of followers. Butler’s own M.A. thesis (2002) on collective memory in Auroville is among the most comprehensive in addressing this gap with respect to this particular community. With fieldwork completed as part of an ongoing oral history project of the Auroville Archives, the thesis is focused primarily on the challenges such a project faces, as well as the possibilities the collection of personal memories has for resolving a community’s disputes. It is not within the scope of the project to examine the processes through which personal memories are interpreted in the course of staging official, collective visions of Auroville, nor is it to investigate how varied versions of events (including that which the Archives might promote) relate to ongoing relationships of power and the contradictory formulation of a communal identity. Another comprehensive work is Eva Olsson’s M.A. thesis on how Aurovilians’ construct a particular sense of “self” (2000). Like the foregoing example, this work again focuses on the relationship between the individual and the community, this time examining the Aurovilians’ “quest for coherence between their individual intentions of life and outer environments.” With considerable ethnographic detail Olsson examines how individuals interpret
the Mother’s guiding text for Auroville, *The Dream*, in relation to the particulars of their life histories. My own work, on the other hand, aims at examining the relationships of power that frame social processes through which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations of *The Dream*, and other important texts, are manifested in concrete actions that create a sense of belonging and place.

In taking a performance studies look at Auroville, I hope to offer a new approach to studies of intentional communities. While there is a vast academic literature that addresses communities and related social experiments, much of it is historic in orientation (Hostetler 1997; Metcalf 1995; Miller 1998; Pitzer 1997). In addition, much seems to concern itself with the relative “success” of such endeavors. For example, in sociologist Judith Kanter’s often-cited study of both utopias of the 1800s and the communes of the 1960s, she establishes criteria for measuring relative success rates based on longevity (1972). Kanter and many other scholars contend that the primary challenge for these communities lies in the survival of institutions (Niman 1997) or in the tension between meeting the necessities of the individual and that of the group (Cook 1996; Francis 1997).

More in the spirit of my own analysis is Eliezer Ben-Rafael’s study (1997) of the kibbutzim, in which he argues that a central dynamic in such communities is the need to formulate values and create symbolic expressions that establish a communal identity and thus, a relationship with the world at large. This view is
closer to my own inasmuch as my analysis of Auroville takes as its starting point
the assumption that the production and interpretation of cultural meanings are as
important, if not more so, than societal structures in the formation of any society.

My methodology for understanding the significance of cultural meanings in the
daily life of communities with specific tenets is in part indebted to Barbara
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s ethnography (1990) of the Hassidim in New York, in
which she demonstrates the importance of performance in the mundane activities
and value formation of religious communities.

In thinking about the legacy of utopian visions as they take form in the
present I am also indebted to Richard Fox’s work about the utopian ideals authored
by Mohandas Gandhi. Utopia, as social experiment, changes over time as ideals
are enacted in response to historical and material conditions. Moreover, as
followers make new uses of the initial concepts, performing the vision in
innovative ways, new experiments are born. For this reason, Fox states for his own
work: “I chronicle not the history of individual authors or experimentalists, but the
ensemble of experiments themselves, and the new set of cultural meanings they
produced.” (1989: 8). Although the scope of the work of Sri Aurobindo and the
Mother cannot yet be compared with the sweeping influence of Gandhian
principles, I am following Fox’s lead in looking at Auroville not as the direct

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product of the teachings that inspire it, but rather as a complex, new cultural constellation that reflects the influence of numerous “authors” and conditions.

Why Performance?

I propose that a concept of “performance” provides a useful model for thinking about the relationship between Auroville’s official ideals and its daily life. Focusing on actual practices, rather than individual or group discourses about them, reveals a series of contradictions which are key to understanding how the Auroville community functions. Moreover, reading and interpreting the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and putting their words into practice – that is performing their philosophy - are central to the project of formulating a sense of community and identity.

Key texts from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother guide people’s everyday activities, thereby constituting a “script” for the community’s development. Sri Aurobindo’s writings form the overarching philosophical basis for the kind of world that Auroville is to become. The Mother, as Auroville’s founder, wrote and said things to people that address specific aspects of life in her dream community. Particularly important are her text called “The Dream,” in which she describes an ideal place, and the “Auroville Charter” (See Appendices I and II). All of these texts are cited constantly both in public forums and private life. As such, they
constitute a kind of “canon,” although Aurovilians may or may not read them, and
may read many other works as well. Collective action involves interpreting these
canonical texts and then presumably proceeding in ways that appropriately embody
the true spirit of those texts. Given the very conscious relationship between
writings and the intention to give them material form, I read Aurovilians’ efforts to
live their philosophy as a kind of long-term, ongoing performance.

The staging of the Auroville script is a work in progress. The community
has been in rehearsal mode since its inception in 1968. Like in all rehearsals,
various ideas about how to perform particular instructions are created, tested out,
modified and abandoned. What is certain is that the vision for a more perfect
society is to be enacted as a monumental, outdoor “environmental performance” at
a particular location in India. Aside from that, however, the participants debate
about how best to do it. In the minds of many Aurovilians, it is the Mother herself
who is the director of this oeuvre. She is not present physically, but guides and
intervenes from the subtle planes that constitute the area “behind the curtain” of the
theater of material reality where Auroville’s destiny unfolds. Yet because she is
not around to sit in the director’s chair and make suggestions aloud, it is left to the
actors themselves to figure out what she wants. Not surprisingly, the actors often
have different ideas about the Mother’s intentions and how best to achieve them.
They spend considerable time researching the things that she said in the past.
Sometimes they consult with, although they do not always heed, respected “dramaturges,” who claim privileged understanding of the director’s notes, either through their own research efforts or through having known the Mother personally. While disagreements abound, the actors have a sense, not that the “show must go on,” but that inevitably the “show IS going to go on.” **Auroville is a performance that is definitely going to happen eventually.** Ultimately, this is not just because of the will of the actors, or even of the director. **It is because the audience for this singular event is the whole world, and even all of the universe and its hidden forces.**

To clarify, performance as I am talking about it is not inherently about aesthetics, nor is it to be viewed as something that takes place outside the flow of everyday life. At the same time it is important to preserve some particularity for the term “performance,” rather than allowing it to encompass any kind of self-conscious activity. My claim that everyday life in Auroville is a performance is based upon circumstances in which there is an explicit connection between ideas and beliefs, on the one hand, and actions on the other. My argument is that such a situation exists specifically in intentional and religious communities, philosophical movements, or even institutions with clearly defined goals.²⁹

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²⁹ Life in Auroville is in this way similar to the nature of the efforts to reform urban, lower-middle class immigrant populations at Hull House in Chicago during the beginning of the 20th century. In her methodically researched book on this
In looking at everyday life as performance under these special conditions, the kinds of things I will examine in Auroville encompass a much wider range of activities than dance and theater. From my perspective, much of what takes place in public and private life is an attempt to manifest Auroville’s script. In other words, Auroville is a long-term performance composed of shorter-term performances that take place on a daily basis. Some of these are informal, with no clear-cut actors and audiences. Sometimes the spectator for individual efforts to embody the teachings may be oneself and the divine. As one Aurovilian once told me, “I try to live as if She (Mother) were watching me at every moment.” At other times, performances are much more structured, even ritualized, as in the case of the early morning bonfire held at the Amphitheater near Matrimandir to commemorate certain important days of the year. As a result, what I will examine in this dissertation includes moments of heightened communication as diverse as reading or writing a book, giving a lecture, looking at the Mother’s photograph, building a cultural center, or eating in the public dining hall. I also discuss at length citational performances, in which Aurovilians reference the words and/or presence of the Mother or Sri Aurobindo. Such citation can take place during moments as diverse as...
as a public meeting, a round of joke telling among friends at a party, or a dance performance based on Sri Aurobindo’s poem *Savitri*.

All of these moments are akin to “cultural performances,” defined as “occasions in which as a culture or society we reflect upon ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others” (MacAloon 1984: 1). In Auroville, however, performances go a step beyond in that they are not simply about reflecting. They are about making stuff happen. Performance in Auroville is the actualization of a potential, a bringing forth of something “virtual” into something that exists in the world (see Bauman 2004). Aurovilians are making the Mother’s vision happen. For example, the Circle experiment, aimed at finding alternative ways of distributing income, is a performative step towards manifesting the Mother’s wish that money should not circulate within Auroville.

At the same time, it is obvious that many of the things that take place in Auroville do not have as an aim manifesting the community’s mandate. Life here is different from other places in that official intentions are quite explicit, but at the end of the day, people are human beings as they are anywhere. Some people in Auroville are just living their lives and are less concerned about performing the Mother’s vision. And surely almost everyone is engaged in activities that would seem to outright contradict common interpretations of the Auroville script. For
example, someone who mistreats a village employee seems to be seriously drifting from the portions of the script that demand the creation of "human unity." In my view, however, such actions still constitute an important part of the performance. They may not be built into the script, but at some level they affirm or resist Auroville’s official intentions. It is not possible to “just live here.” Whether to affirm, disavow or disregard Auroville’s script, one has to make some kind of interpretation of it.

My analysis of micro-level performances borrows from Goffman’s "dramaturgical" view of society, in which social interaction is inherently theatrical as people engage in “impression management” to conceal or publicize their adherence or flouting of commonly accepted norms (1959). My view defers significantly from such a perspective to the extent that I presume that larger social, political, and economic forces shape individual performances of Auroville’s script. In order to understand how individual interpretations are negotiated and played out collectively, it is important to remember that a focus on performance also means detailing the contexts within which a given text, be it written, visual, oral, or architectural, is imbued with meaning by differently situated actors and spectators. In the case of Auroville, this means tracing the broader social, economic, and political conditions that shape Aurovilians’ official and alternative readings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s teachings.
Performances in Auroville, while instrumental in the formation of a sense of community, are not about some vague, harmonious kind of *communitas* in Victor Turner’s sense (1969). They manifest the fact that the fundamental core of human community is as much shaped by power and conflict as it is by an aspiration for harmony. More than “stories that people tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 1973: 448), performances may serve as the stories that people would like to hear about themselves, stories that people know are ideals that do not or cannot yet exist in the world. In Auroville, as elsewhere, how people interpret these stories rarely follows a single line of thought.

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30 In Geertz’s (1973) classic analysis of the Balinese cockfight, he concludes that the event constitutes a metacommentary on the existence of social hierarchies, displaying emotions and tensions that remain hidden in everyday life, and yet are central to Balinese culture. The cockfight thus constitutes a kind of story that people tell themselves about themselves. As such, the cockfight is viewed as a carrier of culture, akin to Singer’s (1972) “cultural performances,” in which performance events are viewed as encapsulating core elements of culture. Problematic to both views is the fact that performance events are not viewed in relation to wider political developments. Both scholars fail to question whether such a thing as culture exists in a coherent, determinable fashion. Moreover, they attribute singular meanings to performances, not considering the fact that differently situated audience members interpret such events in different ways. As Roseberry (1989) comments about Geertz, such analyses pay “insufficient attention to cultural differentiation, to social and political inequalities that affect actors’ differential understandings of the world, other people, and themselves, and to the historical formation of anthropological subjects within processes of uneven development” (1989: 13).
The Performance of the Ethnographer

I view my own participation in this project as very much a kind of performance as well. This dissertation is about the community of Auroville. Yet in acknowledgement of the highly subjective nature of fieldwork, it would be more accurate to say that it is largely an account of my experience in that community. The theatrical nature of fieldwork, particularly in contexts where the creation, preservation, and destruction of a public face is highly significant for individuals’ lives, has always been a crucial aspect of ethnography. The extent to which the ethnographer must transform herself into a repertory of characters in order to make herself acceptable to a given interlocutor at a given point in time, however, has not been explicitly addressed in spite of a plethora of literature about fieldwork and power dynamics of ethnography. An early exception is Gerald Berreman (1962), who reflects on his work in a Himalayan village in the 1950s. Arguing that the anthropologist is someone who must perform “behind many masks,” Berreman’s essay highlights the fact that a fieldworker is rarely if ever perceived as some kind of neutral observer, but instead is equally subject to the constant scrutiny and censure of differently situated informants, whose positionality frames the expectations they have of the ethnographer.
Auroville is not an easy place in which to conduct standard, academic research. First of all, there is a general caution amongst many residents about maintaining a particular image of the community outside, given its delicate position with respect to the Indian State.\textsuperscript{31} Secondly, because Aurovilians place great emphasis upon working in the community, establishing "rapport" with informants requires more than simply introducing oneself as a researcher; one must spend considerable time in Auroville and preferably involve oneself in some work for the community, as is encouraged of all visitors. Finally, on the part of many people, although certainly by no means a majority, there is a mistrust of those who may be seeking to look at Auroville from an intellectual standpoint. Academic research may easily be dismissed as mere "mental" activity and therefore unworthy of the attention of those aimed at higher states of being. This particular form of anti-intellectualism is based on an application of Sri Aurobindo's ideas about the various possible levels of consciousness, with the mind representing the current

\textsuperscript{31} Since Auroville came under purview of the Central Government, some Aurovilians have feared the possibility of State intervention into communal affairs and development. This fear became more acute as Hindu nationalist forces, known for their xenophobia, gained power in India through the 90s. Auroville is also dependent upon the Indian Government for funds, particularly for education. A source of instability for Aurovilians is the government's ability to revoke visas, known as issuing a "Quit Notice," on the basis of questionable or zero legal reasoning or evidence. This has happened in the past and required complex and lengthy negotiations in order to resolve. In some cases, there was nothing that could be done and persons, who had lived in India for years and had invested personal resources in Auroville, were forced to leave.
mass state of awareness in the world. Evolution involves vaulting upwards into more refined, and eventually all-encompassing levels of consciousness.

Presumably, seen from these higher levels, academic work, as scholars working in the world today at conventional academic venues currently practice it, would appear partial and undeveloped.

From the outset, I was acutely aware of the import such attitudes could have for my work as I repeatedly was called upon to answer the question of why I had come to Auroville. In truth there was never an easy answer to such queries. My connection to the place was spread over a lifetime of personal experience with both India and the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. My family and I had been visiting Auroville regularly almost since the community’s inception. Beginning in the 90s my parents began teaching some months each year at one of Auroville’s schools for Tamil village children. And I myself had been visiting Auroville on my own for short periods during summer vacations for several years. Yet my present aims were the result of my academic training and commitment to the validity and importance of intellectual inquiry about the nature of spiritual belief. Which facet of my background I chose to detail depended largely upon my evaluation of what the questioner most wanted to hear. In other words, I took care to perform up to my interlocutor’s expectations.
My relationship to Auroville began even before I was born. In 1967, while pregnant with me, my mother and father sought to become Aurovilians. Unlike today's long and complicated process for entry into the community, at that time all that was required was that a simple application form be submitted to the Mother herself for approval. When my parents applied, the form came back marked in the Mother's own handwriting, "Yes to all three." My parents submitted the required sum of $400 U.S. for securing their place and then spent the next several years dreaming about when such an opportunity for us to move from the United States to Auroville might arise. That plan never materialized. Over time all traces of my family's potential identity as "Aurovillian" were erased, as many official documents were lost in the course of Auroville's political struggles with the Sri Aurobindo Society after the Mother's death. Our lives took other trajectories. In fact, it was only when I announced my intention to do my dissertation work in Auroville that I came to learn of the lost application. Realizing that the lives of my Aurovillian informants could have been my own in a life that was somehow not meant to be was a feeling that remained with me in my fieldwork and throughout the time I wrote the dissertation.

Nevertheless, this personal story was one I rarely revealed other than to my closest friends in Auroville, for fear of making myself a willing participant in the kind of spiritual economy in which authentic, spiritual experience, in this case
conceived as direct contact with the Mother herself, is construed as a sign of one’s worth. For different reasons, it is a story that I am also reluctant to reveal here. A fact from my life history that in the context of my fieldwork potentially stood to legitimize my purpose in the eyes of many informants could produce an opposite effect for me in front of an academic audience. Admitting anything other than an intellectual connection with the site might, in the reckoning of those who believe in the possibility of a detached, impartial observer, erode my authority to talk about the subject at all.

Inevitably, the question of faith arises. Am I writing about a belief system to which I also subscribe at some level? This is not an easy question to answer. I do not think that faith is an easy thing to articulate, because for myself I tend to think of it as a perspective on the world that implies ways of knowing that exist independent of rational, mental processes and, therefore, is very difficult to put into language, either for oneself or others. But, once again speaking only personally, I do not see these ways of knowing as mutually exclusive. In other words, a belief in unseen forces, and a highly critical framework for reflecting on how human beings think about those forces, are propositions that can be entertained simultaneously. To be specific, I have always found much wisdom for my own life in what the Mother and Sri Aurobindo have said and written. In the course of this project I found myself engaged with their ideas in totally new ways and more interested in
their views than I was before. Whether that makes me somehow a "devotee" depends on how one chooses to define that confusing word. At the same time, I am neither an Aurovilian nor an Ashramite and I do not plan to become one soon.

More significantly, I do believe very strongly in the capacity of the human mind to ask interesting questions about the world around it, and to strive to be ever more insightful and critical, even if I accept that the mind has limitations and cannot grasp the full complexity of reality. Without this conviction, I would not seek to obtain a Ph.D. or to become an academic to begin with. At the end of the day, I suppose that all this is to say that I would categorize myself with respect to my material as a sympathetic outsider.

I take the risk of stating all this here because without a personal connection to Auroville, it is unlikely that I could have carried through such a project in the manner that I did. I frequently emphasized to people I met in Auroville that I had been visiting both Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram from my childhood. Moreover, I made a conscious selection of cultural elements that allowed me to metamorphose into what I believed certain Aurovilians expected of me in certain contexts. Conveniently, for no particular reason, I have never removed from the gold chain that I always wear around my neck the locket of the Mother's symbol that my parents purchased for me in childhood. It is common for both Aurovilians and people connected with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to wear rings or lockets with
either the Mother or Sri Aurobindo's symbol (See Figure 22). While the locket usually hangs beneath my clothing, there were times when I opted to pull it out where it was visible, hoping in some vague way that this prop might generate sympathy from an interviewee. My hope was that such costumed performances would allow me to quickly gain a level of acceptance that might not have been possible otherwise.

Gathering from informants' repeated comments, it is certainly the case that my dramatizing a connection to the community's philosophy and founders made my interest in knowing more about Auroville, even if as an academic, more comprehensible. As for whether I succeeded in securing greater confidence, and thereby greater access to sensitive kinds of information, this is another question.

The internal politics of Auroville and the immediacy with which people experience conflicts living in such a small community keep some people on their guard at all times, even when questioned in seemingly disinterested ways by outsiders who are not at all involved in these struggles. For example, when attempting to probe into the specifics of how certain people felt about Satprem, the transcriber-author of the important text, Mother's Agenda, it was impossible to obtain any more than the vaguest of replies, no matter how hard I struggled as interviewer to convey only an innocent curiosity.
**Mother's Symbol**

The central circle represents the Divine Consciousness.
The four petals represent the four powers of the Mother.
The twelve petals represent the twelve powers of the Mother manifested for her work.

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**Sri Aurobindo's Symbol**

The ascending triangle represents the spiritual.
The descending triangle represents the opening descent from matter into the form of life, light and love.
The junction of both - the central square - is the perfect manifestation lying at the centre of creation.
The square inside the square - represents the multiplication of the creative.

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Figure 22: The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's symbols as explained by the Mother in her handwriting
Image courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram

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The theatrical nature of my conscious construction of my own appearance was readily apparent in my choice of dress as well. I grew up in Los Angeles as a "halfie;" my father was born and brought up in Kerala, South India and my mother in Ohio, USA. When wearing Indian clothes, I am readily assumed to be fully Indian. Throughout my life of visits to India, I have always worn only Indian clothes, including regularly tying the traditional sari, which is now worn with less frequency by young, middle-class women. I made the choice for Indian clothes, first because I liked them, and secondly, because I always felt that I was somehow better received in them when living and working in India. Maybe it was all in my head, but it had always seemed to me that even simple transactions, such as negotiating with a rickshaw driver, went more smoothly when I was so dressed. At issue is perhaps the longing of someone who is never fully one thing or another, neither "American" nor "Indian," and who hopes, by dressing up in a costume, to experience "acceptance," no matter how superficial, squarely as one identity over the other.

At any rate, in the context of Auroville, where many, and perhaps most, Western and Indian women alike use Western dress, including shorts and other hot-weather clothing, my decision about what to wear suddenly had more important implications. On the one hand was the issue of how my informants would view me if I wore Indian clothes. Would wearing a salwar kameez, a puttu on my forehead,
and gold ornaments, by virtue of the fact that such garments and accessories are solidly "Indian" in origin and conceal the body, label me as "conservative" and close my access to certain kinds of Indian informants who had struggled in coming to Auroville to throw off the shackles of the "tradition" imposed on them by their families? Would my appearance inhibit what Western Aurovilians might share with me, since they might perceive me as too culturally distinct to understand their experience? There is no doubt that in the end my choice of dress had political overtones in this regard. There are both Indian and Western Aurovilians who complain that the atmosphere in the community has become too "Westernized," offering as evidence that many Aurovilians know little about Indian customs, traditions or languages. Aurovilians who come originally from nearby Tamil village sometimes allege that Aurovilian women reveal too much of their bodies and that this creates problems both for the harassment of women and also in terms of the perception that local people have about Auroville as a whole. There is no doubt that my opting to frequently wear Indian clothes — and occasionally even a sari in spite of the fact that it made travel on my moped awkward — helped me to win the confidence of Tamil informants, even if the quality of my dress also functioned as an instant sign of my upper middle class status. Indian clothes also facilitated contact with some older European Aurovilians, particularly men, whose Orientalist fantasies and perceptions about India and Indian people were the very
subject about which I hoped to learn more. For example, once when interviewing
an older French man, his comments about the beauty of my clothing launched us,
conveniently for me, into a discussion about the relative grace of Indian over
Western women.

Deciding whether to present myself as “Indian” or “American” was further
complicated for me given the fact that throughout the duration of my fieldwork, I
made frequent trips to Chennai, where I lived and studied with my bharatanatyam
guru. My guru is used to having foreign students residing in her house, and has
traveled abroad on numerous occasions. Nevertheless, from the moment we first
met, in her eyes my “part-Malu” (Malayali, from Kerala) side was the more salient
feature of my identity. It was in my interest to cultivate this image, as I was aware
that it permitted me greater intimacy within her family and nuances in my training
that I might not have otherwise received. Switching in and out of this more
“Indian” way of operating within a traditional brahman household, which included
dressing in traditional ways and participating in the numerous ceremonies that are
an integral part of any Hindu life, became second nature for me while in India. It
certainly influenced my perception of Auroville. Moving between the elite cultural
scene of the big city and impoverished, rural Tamil Nadu felt like moving between
two different worlds, even as both of these worlds together constitute “Tamil
culture.” Furthermore, living in close contact with traditional practices threw into
sharp relief the experience of the Westerners I knew in Auroville, and even many
of the Indians who often expressed that I seemed to know so much more about
"Indian culture" than they did themselves.

My mini-performances as ethnographer in Auroville also included taking a
somewhat public role. At the outset of my fieldwork I had envisioned involving
myself in the community by participating as a dancer in the modern dance
company. The opportunity for this never arrived, however, as the group was
scattered during the time of my stay and no productions were in the works.
Following the suggestion of an Aurovilian friend, I decided to volunteer myself as
a staff writer for AV Today, the community’s monthly publication. AV Today
started in 1988 in response to the need for regular information from those interested
in the Auroville project both in India and abroad. Presented in a simple newspaper
style format, with black-and-white photos and occasional cartoons, AV Today
provides the most thorough, on-going coverage of the community’s development.
After a brief informal interview at the AV Today office one morning, I began what
would turn out to be one year of work for this newspaper. During that time I
covered various events, interviewed and profiled Aurovilians, and wrote editorials
and cover articles. Although the editorial team gave me some of my writing
assignments, I often tried to cover topics of my own interest. For example, in one
issue I attempted to address the politics and processes behind the visual
representations that the community produces of itself. In another, I directed myself towards the experience of those Aurovilians who have come to the community from the surrounding villages. This allowed me to gather information also of use to me in my dissertation work, in addition to providing me with a forum in which to participate in group discussions with a group of informed and articulate people, namely the AV Today editorial team.

It quickly became clear, however, that room for what from my point of view was moderately critical thinking was limited. With its wide circulation, including amongst interested and politically powerful people in India, AV Today must take care to avoid discussing challenges and problems that might put the community in an overly negative light. It is in part for this reason that the publication is less interesting for some Aurovilians themselves, who charge that AV Today does not represent all residents’ points of view. In writing for AV Today, I too naturally had to submit to the editorial processes of the publication, and thereby conform to the kind of image of Auroville that the paper represents. Thus, I found myself participating in the construction of some of the very same official discourses that I was interested in examining in my dissertation. This included my being obliged to make reference to the words of Sri Aurobindo or the Mother at times when I felt that the problem under discussion needed to be tackled for its own sake (such, as, for example, the experience of “racism” on the part of Tamil Aurovilians), rather
than just because it contradicted the community's philosophy. In short, I, the ethnographer, was very much engaged in creating part of my own subject matter.

There is no skirting around the fact that my work at AV Today complicates my relationship to my object of study. Nevertheless, my time with this publication allowed me to observe first hand the micro-level social interactions through which public information about the community is produced and circulated. At the same time, it gave me insight into the ways in which community residents endorse or eschew the image of Auroville presented to the outside world, along with the general concern shared by many Aurovilians as to the ways in which they themselves as individuals come to be represented in the eyes of fellow Aurovilians. AV Today provided me with material that I frequently used to focus discussions with friends and solicit responses from a range of informants. It also became an excellent source for information when it came time to write the dissertation, and I frequently cite it in these pages.

My work at AV Today also provided me with a readily identifiable role in Auroville. It was convenient for me to be able to say that I worked there in response to the constant queries of people as to what activities I did in Auroville aside from my own research. People whom I never met came to know of me through my writing. Often when introduced to someone new I would hear him or her say, “Oh, so you are that Shanti.” Although such recognition was at times
beneficial, I was also wary of it for fear of being too closely identified with the publication. Many Aurovilians make it a point not to read *AV Today*, and others refuse to ever grant an interview for it, basically because they believe that the publication fails to prevent a balanced view of the range of opinion present in the community. Even those who consent to be profiled frequently take great care to control what is published, sometimes to the point of insisting on being able to review and edit several drafts of their interviews. Consequently, when conducting interviews for my own research I was careful to emphasize that my dissertation project was completely separate from my journalistic work. Moreover, I took care to present myself as very open to criticism about the newspaper.

To conclude, much of my time in Auroville was a lesson in what Goffman (1959) describes as "impression management," namely attending to one's public face. I do not believe that the experience was unique to me, but rather that performance, whether as artifice or role-playing, shapes any ethnographer's experience. Fieldwork is a focused and intensive kind of social interaction. Entering into any social interaction implies assuming an identity and identity always implies the ways in which we consciously or unconsciously present ourselves to the world. I endeavored to present myself in ways that I believed would allow me to gain access to information that interested me from the kinds of people I sought out. In the end, however, few performances succeed in pleasing
Looking Ahead

To summarize, Auroville is a rich terrain for exploring the processes through which people living in intentional communities negotiate and enact their ideals. By virtue of being a place that thwarts traditional concepts of culture, community, and urban space, understanding Auroville demands an innovative, analytical approach to identity. Thinking about how residents perform Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's philosophy means attending to not only the micro-politics of everyday life, but also the larger fields of culture and political-economy wherein the power to say what the community is, and what it should be, is manifest.

To understand life in Auroville one must pay attention to the writings that function as a "script" that guides the community’s development. This script is based upon a body of philosophical work created by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Chapter 2 is intended to provide a basic introduction. The writings of Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother could be explored in several volumes. Here I examine only the essential ideas.

The chapters that follow are organized around a series of themes that dramatize both the processes through which official interpretations of Auroville’s script are formulated and resisted, and also the points of reference against which Aurovilians formulate their identity. Chapter 3, “The Social Life of Texts in Auroville,” addresses the social interactions that surround the reading, interpretation and performance of the writings of the Auroville script. I argue that it is through processes of reading and interpreting Sri Aurobindo and the Mother that Aurovilians create a sense of common aspiration and camaraderie, even as the very same processes establish a variety of positions from which people experience social bonds and perspectives about the community’s development. After considering some of the essential differences between the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo respectively, I focus upon the various ways in which texts are read, both at the individual and collective levels. I then consider how texts are cited in the public sphere and to what effects. By way of considering some of the complex issues involved in the collective interpretation and performance of the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, especially at the level of policy making in Auroville, I examine the workings of Auroville’s Entry Group, which takes up the task of admitting new members into the community.
Chapter 4, "The Life and Times of Mother's Agenda and Savitri," once again takes up the question of how people read and interpret the Auroville script, but this time focusing on two texts in particular. Both the transcribed conversations known as Mother's Agenda and Sri Aurobindo's epic poem, Savitri, belong to what constitutes a canon of central texts in Auroville. The Agenda exemplifies the ways in which some of the texts that comprise the script for realizing Auroville have important stories behind them. Such stories get woven into the fabric of textual content such that people and events from the past become inseparable in the minds of some readers who approach writings in the present. I discuss the importance of the Agenda, especially its legendary author/transcriber, Satprem, for particular versions of Auroville's history and how collective memory of that time is an issue that shapes some people's view of the community to this day. With respect to Savitri, I consider how this text in particular has inspired the creation of many other texts. I examine the ritual and theatrical performances of Savitri through which Aurovilians affirm common values and philosophical points of reference, while convening with larger forces and one another.

Chapter 5, "The Mother of Auroville," explores the significance of the Mother as the director for the staging of a more perfect society. The opening section of the chapter details the Mother's fascinating life history, the product of early feminism and global cultural trajectories. From here I move to an
examination of the multiplicity of readings that Aurovilians and visitors make of her, including the ways in which some Tamil people see her in relation to South Indian goddesses. Although she is no longer physically present, the Mother continues to act as a centering force that gives shape to the nebulous, collective body of Auroville, serving as a common point of reference for the community’s identity. I will argue that the Mother’s power continues to manifest in concrete, material objects, making her not a static object of devotion, but rather an actor and director in the ongoing performance of her vision for Auroville. In particular I explore photographic images and Matrimandir. My focus throughout the discussion will be on the relationships that Aurovilians establish with the Mother in these forms. Seeing the sacred in relation to social life means not only exploring how the Mother’s presences function as symbols which are common points of reference for community members, but also the ways in which spirituality is continuously framed by relationships of power.

In Chapter 6, “India: The Land of All Difficulties and Cures,” I examine the contradictory relationship between Auroville and India, the geographical and cultural site in which the Mother wanted to enact her vision. Whether to capitalize upon what is believed to be worthy of emulation, or to disavow that which is held to be repugnant, anachronistic and irrelevant, Aurovilians engage in readings of local and pan-Indian culture. These readings both place Auroville within the
context of Indian society, and set it apart from the world that surrounds it. In the first section of the chapter I explore the community’s stance with respect to the local Tamil population. Drawing from observations of meetings, displays and theater, I will examine the official discourses about the role of Tamilians in Auroville’s development and how these discourses are affirmed, flaunted, and contested by Aurovilians. In the second section I discuss various interpretations of Sri Aurobindo’s writings on Indian culture that take place in Auroville in light of the Hindu nationalist movement’s appropriation of Sri Aurobindo. Among other materials I analyze a 2002 conference, “The Sense of the Infinite,” which was dedicated to brainstorming how Sri Aurobindo’s text might inform a traveling multimedia display/installation about India. The event involved academics and artists from throughout India, and culminated in a visit to Auroville by the ultrarightwing Central Government Home Minister, Murli Manohar Joshi.

One of the singular features of Auroville is that it constitutes an endeavor to create from the ground up an actual city. This, one could say, is the main “plot” that weaves through each scene of Auroville’s performance of the Mother’s vision. Since the Mother gave some specific instructions with respect to urban planning, the layout and buildings of Auroville are in and of themselves performative. In other words, the built environment constitutes a kind of scenography for the display of philosophical principles. Chapter 7, “Building the City,” is dedicated to
understanding the role of creating a sense of place in the construction of a sense of community. Based on Charles Rutheiser’s concept of “imagineering” (1996) which serves to illustrate the ways in which communities are not only constructed materially but are also imagined, I will analyze how Auroville is being put together as a “place” through city-making activities and representations of Auroville. I also examine some of the multitudinous uses to which residents put particular spaces in their affirmation and contestation of hegemonic ideas of what Auroville is meant to be.

The dissertation ends with a short, concluding chapter. After a brief analysis of the annual bonfire that takes place in Auroville on the occasion of its birthday on February 28, I offer some thoughts about the future of Auroville.
In order to understand life in Auroville more fully, a working knowledge of some of the essential concepts from the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is helpful. It is this corpus of ideas that forms the basis for the Mother’s “script” of how the enactment of a utopian vision for humanity should proceed. Before undertaking an analysis of the materials, it is important to state that while Auroville was explicitly created as the realization of a particular set of ideals based upon a specific body of philosophical work, it is not the case that all Aurovilians are well versed in this philosophy. Some know next to nothing about it. Others may have read few of the relevant teachings. In other words, while officially speaking it is necessary to be conversant with the works, and encouraged to cultivate a more than superficial knowledge of them, there are in actuality varying levels of fluency with the underlying ideas. Having said this, it is the case that the philosophy of Auroville’s founders still guides the daily life of many of its residents. And certainly many Auroville residents and all of its leaders know and rely on key texts and guidelines. These play an important role in the official, public discourses of the community.
In a nutshell, the philosophy revolves around Sri Aurobindo’s formulation of a scientific and spiritual vision of evolution that envisages a complete transformation of the world and the emergence of a new spiritualized, post-human species. Sri Aurobindo detailed his vision of life in about 30 published volumes, discussing topics which are primary concerns in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, politics, psychology, culture, and religion.

His thought was very much the product of his unique life trajectory. As discussed in the Introduction, before he embarked upon spiritual practice, Sri Aurobindo was brought up and educated in England and later joined India’s independent movement (see Chapter 6). He was thus uniquely able to recast esoteric Indian spiritual thought in terms accessible to the modern, scientific thinker. As a result, his writings appeal to a wide spectrum of people from India and the West. He is of particular interest to spiritual seekers of an intellectual frame of mind. His contribution has been recognized among New Age circles as well. For example, recently the article, “Why Sri Aurobindo is Cool” appeared in the magazine, What is Enlightenment? (Hamilton 2002). Also, in a tribute to Sri Aurobindo, Ken Wilber, a best selling thinker of the growing evolutionary and transpersonal psychology movements in the United States, who acknowledges Sri Aurobindo in the formulation of his own theories, has written:

Aurobindo’s genius was not merely that he captured the profundity of India’s extraordinary spiritual heritage. He was the first great philosopher-
sage to deeply grasp the nature and meaning of the modern idea of
evolution. And thus, in Aurobindo, we have the first grand statement of an
evolutionary spirituality that is an integration of the best of ancient wisdom
and the brightest of modern knowledge (2000: ix-x).

Sri Aurobindo’s major works are The Life Divine, The Synthesis of Yoga,
Essays on the Gita, The Secret of the Veda, The Ideal of Human Unity, and The
Human Cycle. Most of these were written in the period 1914-1920 and were
published in serialized form in his monthly philosophical review, The Arya (see
Figure 23). After 1920, with the exception of his epic poem, Savitri, Sri
Aurobindo’s writing mainly consisted of thousands of personal letters to his
disciples in which he guided them in their practice of Integral Yoga, a new spiritual
discipline developed by him and the Mother.

The Mother was Sri Aurobindo’s close collaborator, developing Integral
Yoga with him and continuing the work after he passed away. Sri Aurobindo
himself recognized her as his spiritual equal. She directed all activities at the Sri
Aurobindo Ashram founded in Pondicherry in 1926. Much later in 1969, in a
statement written for a UNESCO committee, she described her own role in the
following way:

The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo’s vision was entrusted
to the Mother. The creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society
expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken [...] The Ashram founded and built by the Mother was the first step towards the accomplishment of this goal. The project of Auroville is
the next step, more exterior, which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to
Figure 23: Sri Aurobindo posed as writing the *Arya*, circa 1917
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind (1980a: 210).

It is important to note that the “new world” Sri Aurobindo and the Mother envisioned had nothing to do with “religion,” in their point of view. In fact, they both avidly argued that the age of religion was over. They did not advocate specific practices or insist that people adhere to specific tenets or system of morality. From their perspective and that of their followers, they worked to transform the world and all those within it. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville are regarded as experiments in collective living that can perhaps be instrumental in facilitating planetary evolution.

Sri Aurobindo’s Epistemology:

Before looking at the details of Sri Aurobindo’s thought, it is important to grasp something of Hindu philosophy generally. For starters, there is no precise Indian equivalent for the word “philosophy,” which for the Greeks meant a “love of thinking.” Most scholars generally regard the Sanskrit equivalent as “darśana.” However, referring basically to wisdom that is “revealed,” this term has little to do with the kind of thinking implied by the Greek term. For example, the content of the four Vedas, considered the fount of many Indian spiritual traditions, constitutes “śruti,” which is a special kind of knowledge that is revealed and seen by an inner eye. Indian mysticism asserts that the fundamental nature of ultimate reality is
transcendent. It cannot be grasped by the rationality, which must restrict itself to
insight gained from the sensorial world. The transcendent reality must be accessed
through intuition, or ways of knowing that exist beyond the mind, and therefore
outside of language and other cultural frameworks. Thus, unlike Western
metaphysics after Plato and Aristotle, which is based on knowledge acquired by
means of dialectical reasoning, Indian metaphysics is based on spiritual experiences
or what Sri Aurobindo calls, “the logic of the Infinite” (1970d: 329). Here Sri
Aurobindo aligns himself with a belief system that stands at the heart of many
Indian spiritual traditions. It is to access this kind of knowledge that Indian sages
and mystics have developed innumerable spiritual disciplines. According to Sri
Aurobindo, it leads to a vastly more insightful view of the true nature of reality.

For example, in talking about the different planes of existence, he states:

“Nothaving bound ourselves down, like so much of modern thought, to the
dogma that […] the analysis of physical experience by the reason alone [is]
verifiable […] and anything beyond this an error, self-delusion and
hallucination, we are free to accept this evidence and to admit the reality of
these planes” (1970c: 787-88).

Examined academically, this stance raises a series of questions. As Sri
Aurobindo biographer and independent scholar Peter Heehs asks,

Are mystics right in thinking that what they feel themselves to be in contact
with is a (or the) reality? If it is real for them, is it necessarily real for
others? Do their private experiences put them in a position to make claims
about the nature of life and the world? If these truth-claims disagree with
one another, are some or all of them refuted? Is there one Truth or many
truths, or is “truth” a human construction determined by social and political

Much of the worldview of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is subject to such questions; their teachings are to be accepted on faith. But whatever the answer to such questions -- and it is not my intention in this dissertation to answer them -- it is important to note that no matter where one stands in relation to belief and belief systems, Sri Aurobindo's writings are noteworthy for their consistent and convincing way of presenting a comprehensive, sophisticated world-view. Let me be specific.

Sri Aurobindo’s Vision:

Sri Aurobindo bases his vision upon the ancient Vedantic premise of “Brahman,” a transcendent entity who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.¹

¹ The Vedanta refers to several philosophical schools based upon the Upanishads, which are a class of vedic and post-vedic Sanskrit texts dealing with Brahman, or the Absolute Reality. Reflection on the upanishads, along with meditation and spiritual experience, can lead to the realization of Brahman. Vedanta forms the basis for most contemporary spiritual teachings in India and is so influential that in the minds of many people it is an important fundament of the Indian view of the world. Among the most influential of its schools is Advaita, or non-dualism, especially as promoted by Shankara in the 8th century. The primary argument of Advaita is that the world as we commonly know it is unreal and that one must transcend this maya, or illusion, in order to realize changeless and eternal Brahman. This is antithetical to Sri Aurobindo’s ideas about the involution of the divine consciousness into matter and the need to transform the world, rather than escape from it. For a more detailed discussion about Vedanta, see the anthology, Heehs 2002.
This Brahman is all that is created and is yet beyond creation. It manifests in the universe through infinite forms. Vedanta describes Brahman as “Sachchidananda,” meaning that which possesses three attributes: Sat (Absolute Existence), Chit-Tapas (Absolute Consciousness and Energy/Force), and Ananda (Absolute Bliss). While Sat manifests as the exterior form of creation, Chit-Tapas exists as the consciousness contained within the form.\(^2\) Everything in creation exhibits these two attributes. By means of evolution, creation’s innumerable and highly varied forms rediscover their oneness with Brahman. In this \textit{lila}, or divine play/sport, “All evolution is the progressive self-revelation of the One to himself” (1997a: 219).

The ultimate purpose of this game, which cannot really be expressed in language, is something on the order of what we might identity as Ananda or Bliss. Quoting from his translation of the Upanishads, Sri Aurobindo states, “From Ananda all existences are born, by Ananda they remain in being and increase, to Ananda they depart” (1970d: 101).

In thinking about how it is that evolution takes place, Sri Aurobindo relies on a concept of “involution,” to refer to the descent of Brahman into the lowest or simplest level of creation, namely inert matter (185). During evolution, this One

\(^2\) Sanskrit terminology often finds no English corollary, making translation difficult and subject to opinion. “\textit{Tapas}” can have other more specific meanings in particular contexts, as in hatha yoga where it refers to the heat generated through \textit{asana} or asecetic practice. In the context of his argument, Sri Aurobindo uses the term in a broader sense to refer to energy and force more generally. \textit{Tapas} is something dynamic, something that makes things happen.
Self gradually liberates itself through a growing perfection. Sri Aurobindo describes this process in the following way:

This One Being and Consciousness is involved here in Matter. Evolution is the method by which it liberates itself; consciousness appears in what seems to be inconscient, and once having appeared is self-impelled to grow higher and higher and at the same time to enlarge and develop towards a greater and greater perfection. Life is the first step of this release of consciousness; mind is the second; but the evolution does not finish with mind, it awaits a release into something greater, a consciousness which is spiritual and supramental. The next step of the evolution must be towards the development of Supermind and Spirit as the dominant power in the conscious being. For only then will the involved Divinity in things release itself entirely and it become possible for life to manifest perfection (1972c: 95).

Matter, Life, (also referred to as the “Vital” by Sri Aurobindo), and Mind form the basis of our earthly existence. Since Mind is still limited in its scope, there is a fourth principle, the principle of Supermind, endowed with infinite power and integral knowledge, which will one day manifest in the world through evolution.

In *The Life Divine* (1970d, 1970e), which is an account of his vision of evolution, Sri Aurobindo explains that all three of Brahman’s qualities are present in matter, even if hidden. Starting with the early stages in evolution, namely inert matter and plants, and moving upwards towards animals, human beings and eventually the Supermind, Brahman reveals more and more of its complexity. In other words, each evolutionary level expresses more fully the attributes of Sat, Chit-Tapas and Ananda. Proof of this is the observation that in biological evolution as we can witness it, the capabilities and consciousness of forms seems to increase.
Plain matter, as manifest in rocks, is inert. But then arose plants, which do have responses and can grow and transform. Animals are capable of a great range of instinctive reactions and interact in a variety of ways with the world around them and one another. Some animals demonstrate measurably what we humans identify as intelligence. Human beings, of course, embody the mind’s capabilities to the greatest degree. Moreover, they have a rational will and more complicated emotions than animals.

Yet humans do not manifest the full complexity and power of Brahman, and so they are not the end of the process. As, “evolution is not finished; reason is not the last word, nor the reasoning animal the supreme figure of Nature,” Sri Aurobindo asserts that yet to come is another level of consciousness, known as the Supramental. The Supramental has powers and insights vastly greater than the mind. It will be the primary consciousness of a new evolutionary form. Sri Aurobindo states, “as man emerged out of the animal, so out of man, the superman emerges” (1997a: 443). This new species will possess all of Brahman’s divine qualities, namely immortality, absolute consciousness, and omnipotence.

Significantly, the Supramental creation will be one that manifests a unity, even as it will be infinitely diverse. In this way, Sri Aurobindo’s Superman defers radically from the new being envisioned by others, among them the Nazis and Nieztsche, who imagined a new race rooted in the dominion over others, rather than in the
peaceful recognition of the essential unity of all beings and the disavowal of power sought on behalf of an egoistic sense of self.

The Typal Planes:

Brahman did not choose to express itself by means of evolution alone. Sri Aurobindo posits that during the process of involution, seven other subtle, “typal” worlds sprung into being. Each of these expresses an essential quality of the Self or Sachhidananda. They do not participate in evolution, but manifest some ruling principle (Vital, Mind, Supramental, etc.) fully.

These typal worlds give impetus to evolution on earth. Sri Aurobindo states, “The development of Life, Mind and Spirit in the physical being presupposes their existence [that of typal planes]; for these powers are developed here by two co-operating forces, an upward-tending force from below, an upward-drawing and downward-pressing force from above.” (1970c.: 790). Without the typal influence creation would have remained at the level of Matter, as there is no reason why Matter given its own devices would aspire to liberate the spirit inside it. At each level of evolution, there is a prior descent of the corresponding plane onto Earth. So, for example, the principle of the Mind descended onto Earth from the Mental Plane long before human beings, who possess rational will and thought, were around.
People who have faith in Sri Aurobindo’s view of reality believe that the spiritual consciousness for the next evolutionary stage, that of the Supermind, has already descended to earth from the Supramental Plane. The Mother stated that the Supramental Manifestation in Matter took place in 1956. Depending upon humans’ capacity to consciously work towards progress, the Supramental race will be born within perhaps 300 years, an astoundingly rapid transformation in evolutionary terms to be sure. While hard to fathom given the world’s present state, the arrival of such a time is seen as certain. In a message given in 1956, the Mother decisively stated: “The manifestation of the Supramental upon earth is no more a promise but a living fact, a reality. It is at work here, and one day will come when the most blind, the most unconscious, even the most unwilling shall be obliged to recognize it” (1980b: 198). How exactly the Supramental Consciousness will effect the world is an open question.

Pioneers of the Descent:

In the Indian tradition, one important form of descent of divine power is the “avatar,” which is a physical incarnation of divinity, who appears at times of crisis or intense change to assist earthly evolution. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother did not refer to themselves as “avatars.” They saw their role as pioneers whose task it was to expedite the Supramental Consciousness on Earth. Some followers of Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother view them as *avatars*, but many admirers would certainly regard them as individuals whose epic work is of great significance for all humankind.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother regarded themselves as constituting one single consciousness manifest in two separate bodies. Their collaboration was an indispensable part of the work to be achieved and did not terminate with Sri Aurobindo’s physical death. When he passed away in 1950, the Mother continued the work of “making [...] transformative energies of the highest realms of the Divine available to human beings” (Combs 1996: 60). She stated that although Sri Aurobindo was not physically present, the two continued the work they had taken up together: “He is still with me, day and night, thinking through my brain, writing through my pen, speaking through my mouth and acting through my organizing power” (1980a: 50).

Devotees commonly assert that upon Sri Aurobindo’s departure, the Mother carried forward from where he left off, continuing to meet the challenge of transforming matter, experimenting foremost with the material of her own physical body. Her psychological and spiritual experiences during this period are recorded as transcripts of conversations in French and posthumously published in thirteen volumes under the title, *The Mother’s Agenda* (1981). As established by the *Agenda*, the Mother’s first step was to conclude that the consciousness of the
individual cells of the body needed to be divinized. At a later stage she worked on the subconscient and the inconscient realms, which are regarded as the foundation of material existence. Among her most noteworthy endeavors was the Supramental Manifestation that occurred in 1956. The Mother explained that this occult event was the moment when the evolutionary principle of the Supermind descended onto the earth. From this time until her passing in 1974, the Mother worked to form a prototype Supramental body that upon its fulfillment would be immortal. As a result, many of her devotees were truly taken by surprised by her physical demise. Others, however, believe that the Mother succeeded in this work, and that her prototype of an immortal Supramental body awaits on a subtle plane for the moment when it will inevitably, physically manifest on earth.

Psychology:

One of the things the Mother sought to demonstrate with her own experience is that while the evolutionary progress from the mind to the Supermind is an inevitable, natural process that does not depend on human volition, human beings can elect to participate in the process, thereby expediting the birth of the new race. According to Sri Aurobindo, while “[t]he former steps in evolution were taken by Nature without a conscious will in the plant and animal life, in man Nature becomes able to evolve by a conscious will in the instrument” (1972c: 95). It is not
so easy, however, for human beings are a complex mix of myriad impulses and desires that arise from various parts of their being, including from the many levels of which they are totally unaware in everyday life.

Sri Aurobindo explains that in the course of evolution from Matter to Life to Mind, human beings have acquired a physical body, a vital (emotional) body, and a mental body. The three planes, however, are but a part of a person's consciousness, namely the outer ego that governs awareness in daily life. Sri Aurobindo identifies almost a dozen planes of being that lie above, below, and within the outer nature, levels respectively known as the supraconscient, the subconscient, and the subliminal.

In Sri Aurobindo's vision, the varying levels within an individual's nature correspond to and connect with the typal worlds. Each level within a person is governed by the particular laws and principles that shape its typal counterpart. In other words, a unique form of consciousness shapes each dimension of a person. For instance, the physical body has a consciousness that is prone to inertia and habitual responses to stimuli. Part of the mind is associated with that body kind of consciousness. Similarly, ruling the emotions is a vital consciousness and mind propelled by desires, reactions, and impulses. The Mind itself, or the mental level of consciousness, has the ability to be reflexive and rational. The challenge arises from the fact that most human beings are not able to differentiate between these
three different minds within them. Sri Auribindo writes, "Each plane of our being – mental, vital, physical – has its own consciousness, separate though interconnected and interacting; but to our outer mind and sense, in our waking experience, they are all confused together" (1970b: 347). Consequently, it is not at all easy to escape the influence of these various parts and consciously facilitate evolution.

What guides the process of evolutionary transformation at this core of confused elements is a divine entity free from the laws that bind the other levels of being. A unique feature of Sri Aurobindo’s view of psychology is his concept of an individualized soul, known as the “psychic being.” This psychic being constitutes the innermost part of a human being, hidden from the surface consciousness by all the other planes within a person. As he explains:

The soul is something of the Divine that descends into the evolution as a Divine Principle within it to support the evolution of the individual out of the Ignorance into the Light. It develops in the course of the evolution a psychic individual or soul individuality which grows from life to life, using the evolving mind, vital and body as its instruments. It is the soul that is immortal while the rest disintegrates; it passes from life to life carrying its experiences in essence and the continuity of the evolution of the individual. (1970b: 295-296).

The presence of the psychic being is rarely felt in our ordinary consciousness. However, through spiritual discipline or through successive rebirths, the psychic being progressively expresses itself by bringing the outer nature under its direct control. This process of discovering one’s psychic being and
allowing it to integrate and guide the different planes of one’s being constitutes the first step in an individual’s conscious participation in the evolutionary process of herself and the world.

**Integral Yoga:**

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother formulated a spiritual discipline called “Integral Yoga” in order to help people participate in evolution. The Sanskrit word “yoga” connotes union with the Divine. Sri Aurobindo once described Integral Yoga in this way:

> Our Yoga is a Yoga of transformation, but a transformation of the whole consciousness and the whole nature from the top to the bottom, from its hidden inward parts to its most tangible external movements. It is neither an ethical change nor a religious conversion, neither sainthood nor ascetic control, neither a sublimation nor a suppression of the life and vital movements that we envisage, nor is it either a glorification or a coercive control or rejection of the physical existence. What is envisaged is a change from a lesser to a greater, from a lower to a higher, from a surface to a deeper consciousness—indeed to the largest, highest, deepest possible and a total change and revolution of the whole being in its stuff and mass and every detail into that yet unrealised diviner nature of existence (1997a: 371).

In comparing his path with the many other spiritual disciplines born on Indian soil, Sri Aurobindo states:

> In the past, it [realization of the Spirit] has been attempted by a drawing away from the world and a disappearance into the height of the Self or Spirit. Sri Aurobindo teaches that a descent of the higher principle is possible which will not merely release the spiritual Self out of the world, but release it in the world [...] and make it possible for the human being to find himself dynamically as well as inwardly and grow out of his still animal
humanity into a diviner race. The psychological discipline of Yoga can be used to that end by opening all the parts of the being to a conversion or transformation through the descent and working of the higher still concealed supramental principle.

To put it succinctly, Integral Yoga does not seek a renunciation of life and liberation from the world, but rather a transformation of life and the world. Similarly, it does not advocate a rejection of the different parts of one’s being, but a transformation and integration of those parts into a Divine Nature. “This, however,” Sri Aurobindo warns, “cannot be done at once or in a short time or by any rapid or miraculous transformation” (1972c: 96). Many steps have to be taken by the seeker before the supramental descent is possible, as there are several ranges of consciousness between the ordinary human mind and the supramental Truth-Consciousness. These must be experienced and then in turn allowed to transform one’s mind, vital energies and body.

Although he conceived of his yoga as a “battle,” Sri Aurobindo was encouraging: “The process of this self-discipline or Sadhana is therefore long and difficult, but even a little of it is so much gained because it makes the ultimate release and perfection more possible” (96-97). To help in this painstaking process, Sri Aurobindo emphasizes the need for a constant aspiration for the Divine, for a total rejection of one’s egoistic desires and a complete surrender to the Supramental Force. The concept of surrender is of fundamental importance for Sri Aurobindo for he and his followers believe that the individual cannot achieve Supramental
consciousness **without the aid of the divine force**, whose powers and perceptions are infinite. The easiest way to make progress is for a seeker to surrender to the working of the Supermind, which is the highest power of the Divine.

In spite of the surrender, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga gives immense freedom to the individual to pursue her inner development. There are few practices prescribed for everyone, and in moral terms, there are not "rights" and "wrongs."

This is because Integral Yoga postulates that each human being embodies a unique individual essence that she must discover and then express in the world. According to the Mother, the best way to go about transforming oneself and the world is "to realize one’s own being, to enter into conscious relation with the supreme Truth of one’s own being, in any form, by any path – it does not matter at all – but this is the only way. We carry, each individual carries within him a truth, and this is the truth he must unite with, this is the truth he must live; and so the path he must follow to reach and realize this truth is the path that will lead him as near as possible to Knowledge (1977c: 138).

Another unique feature of Integral Yoga is its emphasis on the **physical world**. This is because it is a discipline that aims to spiritually transform life in its material conditions on the earth, rather than to escape from it. This goal gives rise to myriad practices, including seeking the **perfection of the body** through physical exercise, the **conscious care of the material objects**, doing **physical labor**, and
seeking to cultivate an appreciation for beauty and aesthetics. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother asserted that matter, while inert and unconscious, embodies the Divine Consciousness and for this should be respected. Going along with this they taught that by engaging with the material world consciously—through work and activities—one could bring about both a change in matter, as well as propel one’s inner growth. As the Mother explained, “Work, even manual work, is something indispensable for the inner discovery. If one does not work, if one does not put his consciousness into matter, the latter will never develop.[…] To establish order around oneself helps to bring order within oneself” (1981b: 248).

Collective Yoga:

Sri Aurobindo’s yoga aims to transform the whole human species, indeed all life. As described by the Mother:

For this transformation to succeed, all human beings-- even all living beings as well as their material environment--must be transformed. Otherwise things will remain as they are: an individual experience cannot change terrestrial life […].Not only an individual or a group of individuals, or even all individuals, but life […] has to be transformed. Without such a transformation we shall continue having the same misery, the same calamities and the same atrocities in the world. A few individuals will escape from it by their psychic development, but the general mass will remain in the same state of misery. (1980b: 316)

Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy teaches that each individual practicing Integral Yoga confronts a particular psychological difficulty that needs to be transformed. Once
the transformation is achieved in one individual, this affects the whole of humanity. Corollary to this belief is the fact that the complete transformation of humankind cannot be carried out by single individuals, for each of these represents only a particular type of personality. In order to achieve a complete transformation of human nature on a planetary scale, all personality-types need to be transformed. As stated by the Mother, “by the very nature of things, it [the Supramental Transformation] is a collective ideal that calls for a collective effort so that it may be realized in the terms of an integral human perfection” (1980a: 210). Neither the Mother nor Sri Aurobindo addressed some of the specifics of this theory, nor do, to my knowledge, any of their many commentators. For example, since they were writing before population growth entered common parlance as a global problem, they do not address how the increase in numbers of people relates to the idea of different personality-types. As for whether each and every individual represents a different type, this is also somewhat unclear, although people I spoke with informally about this issue seemed to concur that it is not precisely the case that there are as many types as there are human beings, and that, therefore, everyone on the planet must do Integral Yoga in order to bring about the transformation that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo talked about. The fact that the Mother indicated that Auroville’s eventual population of 50,000 could be the catalyst for world change supports this supposition.
The relationship between the individual and the rest of the world makes
the yogic burden particularly onerous. Sri Aurobindo says,

Accepting life, he (the seeker of the Integral Yoga) has to bear not only his
own burden, but a great part of the world’s burden too along with it, as a
continuation of his own sufficiently heavy load. Therefore his Yoga has
much more the nature of a battle than others’; but this is not only an
individual battle, it is a collective war waged over a considerable country.
He has not only to conquer in himself the forces of egoistic falsehood and
disorder, but to conquer them as representatives of the same adverse and
inexhaustible forces in the world (1999: 77).

Consequently, many practitioners of the Yoga conceive of its benefits as not only
for themselves, but also for the advancement of all of humanity.

**Human Unity and the Ideal Society**

Going hand in hand with the idea of yoga being a collective endeavor is Sri
Aurobindo’s call for human unity. This ideal originates in the perception that one
and the same Divine Consciousness, or Brahman, is at the heart of all creation. Sri
Aurobindo goes on to state that a mere intellectual belief in human unity can mean
nothing in evolutionary terms. Actual unity can only be attained only through the
progressive spiritual realization of the oneness of all creation. It is important to
note that human unity here does not mean uniformity, but rather a unity that
celebrates the infinite diversity in the universe. Sri Aurobindo asserted that if one
were to start from this premise of unity, then there would be “free room for the
realisation of the highest human dreams, for the perfectibility of the race, a perfect

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society, a higher upward evolution of the human soul and human nature” (1997b: 586). This can take place only when each individual, representing a unique aspect of the infinite diversity of universe, manifests the unique Divine personality within and in so doing finds her place in the harmonious order of the Supramental creation.

In Sri Aurobindo’s view of history, human unity was an absolute necessity. If it were not achieved, the consequences could be disastrous. Herein lies the importance of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and as a model for a more perfect human society, Auroville. The effort to realize a place in which individuals actively seek to manifest their psychic beings on a collective level helps all of humanity in its inevitable battle against the dark forces that want to block evolutionary progress. As reported by the Mother, Sri Aurobindo related that the manifestation of Auroville would be “a practical means for creating a human unity that would be strong enough to fight against war” (1981a: 222).

Human unity is one of the prerequisites for the ultimate realization of a more perfect collectivity. One of the main features of the teachings of both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is that they preoccupied themselves not only with the inner growth of the individual, but also with the conditions for the progress of society as a whole. Sri Aurobindo’s ideas on the topic filter through many of his writings. The Mother depicts her vision for an ideal world most succinctly in her
manifesto, "The Dream," a text that circulates widely in Auroville and appears in many of the community’s brochures (see Appendix 1).

The Mother asserts that a spiritual society is one in which the psychic being of each individual manifests and life is free of petty and unharmonious moralities and limited hierarchical organizations. Such a world is not going to manifest overnight, however. On the contrary, the Mother indicated at various times that it take a long time, perhaps even 1,000 years. Present conditions and human consciousness do not yet allow for a supramental world. This is no reason, however, to refrain from striving towards greater and greater perfection. As Sri Aurobindo states, "With the present morality of the human race a sound and durable human unity is not yet possible; but there is no reason why a temporary approximation to it should not be the reward of strenuous aspiration and untiring effort. By constant approximations and by partial realisations and temporary successes Nature advances" (1997a: 467). Such words are encouraging for a place like Auroville, which for as imperfect as it may be in its present state, strives in a spirit of experimentation to embody more and more fully the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.
Integral Yoga in Auroville:

Mother created Auroville as a stage in which to enact ideas about planetary evolution and a spiritualized society. The eventual performance of her vision was not to end in the mere collective embodiment of scripted principles. Its ultimate goal was to foment a universal transformation. As she stated in a message for UNESCO in 1972, “Auroville is intended to hasten the advent of the supramental reality upon earth” (1980a: 221). Whether the residents of Auroville consciously practice the Integral Yoga or not, it is believed that each individual has a role to play in the collective transformation of humanity. From Sri Aurobindo’s point of view:

For a spiritual and supramental yoga, humanity should be variously represented. For the problem of transformation has to deal with all sorts of elements favourable and unfavourable. The same man indeed carries in him a mixture of these two things. If only sattvic (virtuous) and cultured men come for yoga, men without very much of the vital difficulty in them, then, because the difficulty of the vital element in terrestrial nature has not been faced and overcome, it might well be that the endeavor would fail (1970c: 856).

As such, it is understood that being an Aurovilian does not mean being an enlightened being, or even adhering necessarily to overtly “spiritual” practices. It was envisioned as a place in which the full spectrum of human activity could be undertaken in the spirit of yoga and thereby provide for the collective transformation of all humanity.
As for Auroville's progress towards manifesting a spiritual society, the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother for human unity and a spiritual society being so far-reaching and revolutionary guarantees that Auroville will not immediately be the perfect place its spiritual founders desired. In their own words, it will take time until such ideals can be lived in the physical world. Furthermore, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother repeatedly said that the Supramental Force works out things in its own manner in ways that they could not entirely predict. For instance, the Mother had not expected the Supramental Descent of 1956 to take place in the way it did (Vrekhem 1999). One of the exciting dimensions of the Integral Yoga is that it does not constitute a body of foregone conclusions. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother indicate that an evolutionary transformation is to take place, but the exact details of that transformation cannot yet be fully known.

Thus, Auroville is a performance that is still in rehearsal. Like any rehearsal, techniques for staging the Mother's vision are proposed, experimented with, scrapped, and revamped on an ongoing basis as participants debate about the best ways in which to stage an evolutionary transformation. In the chapters that follow I will examine how the rehearsal process is shaped by the social processes of interpreting and practicing the rich repertory of concepts and aspirations that inspire people to take part in it.
CHAPTER 3
THE SOCIAL LIFE OF TEXTS IN AUROVILLE

The written texts of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo guide Auroville, creating the basis for the community's goals and philosophy. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, they can be understood as constituting a kind of script that informs the daily lives of Aurovilians, in as much as many of them see their lives as an attempt to embody specific principles and collectively stage a particular vision of society. It becomes important, therefore, to examine how exactly people read, interpret, and, eventually, endeavor to perform what they believe these texts say.

As argued by Heinrich Von Stietencron, a religious canon is "endowed with an aura of sacredness which derives both from the original seers, rishis, prophets, or teachers who formulated the message, and from the eternal truth which is thought to be encapsulated in the text of canonical scripture" (2001: 14). Similarly, the central importance of the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is two-fold. Many people treasure them as creations of near divine figures. In other words, the writings are the repository of the charisma of the authors, whose divine agency brings the spiritual community of Auroville into being. At the same time, Aurovilians value the texts as documents that include all of the key concepts operating in Auroville. Everything a person needs for proper living and for
understanding the nature of existence can be found in them. The constant search for particular insights and how best to apply them—whether at the individual or collective level—invests the texts with life. It makes Auroville a dynamic place that supports a multiplicity of perspectives.

Texts play an important role in fostering a sense of community on the part of Auroville’s multicultural and spatially dispersed population. Searching out meaning in the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is an activity that unites Aurovilians in a collective, if conflictive, endeavor. This does not imply, however, a uniformity of process. Aurovilians read, interpret and debate these canonical texts in a host of ways. And the performances that the texts inspire shape both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic versions of what it means to be an Aurovillian.

It is important to note that although most Aurovilians are engaged in some kind of interpretation of the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, they have vastly different motives for doing so. For example, some people come to Auroville because they are committed to living in a place that supports their practice of Integral Yoga. On the other hand, some people who have grown up in Auroville may not have made as deliberate a choice to become residents. They may not want to engage with even the most central philosophical texts. These persons seem to “just live here.” But an individual’s disengagement does not, finally, detach her from the “work” of the community. It simply is not possible to “just live here.” To live or even visit Auroville inherently means paying attention to the writings of the
Mother and Sri Aurobindo, even if only to feign an interest in them or to outright disavow them. The bottom line is that willingly or unwillingly, sincerely or disingenuously, all Aurovilians enter into some process of interpreting the canonical texts.

Aurovilians are primarily concerned with the content of written texts. In contrast, what is of concern to me is what I dub, following Arjun Appadurai’s discussion (1986) about the social lives of material artifacts, “the social life of texts.” This follows from my interest in Aurovilians’ attempts to perform what they believe these writings state. As performance studies from its inception has emphasized, it is the difference between just reading a script and discussing its aesthetic, historical or political content, as opposed to analyzing how people actually interact with it.

My interest follows from the premise that the meaning and significance of texts evolve through dynamic interactions between writings and the readers who read them. Many people believe that the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo possess an inherent power that is the product of the consciousness and divine intentions of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo themselves. Whatever the motivations and capacities of the authors, however, the fact remains that the development of Auroville is shaped by its residents’ attempts to understand those original intentions and then decide how best to execute them in concrete activities. In other words, it is just like “the fact that someone has to direct an opera or a play, someone has to
conduct the orchestra through the score, someone has to read the poem or novel" (Donoghue 1998: 94). In Auroville people must interpret and then try to embody the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, as well as enact the specific instructions for Auroville.

The purpose of this chapter is to gain an overall sense of the ways in which people read canonical texts and the issues surrounding their ongoing citation and performance in daily life. I will focus first on the general characteristics of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s writings, including the processes behind their publication and the basic differences of style and content between them. I then address both individual and collective strategies for reading these important texts. This includes considering the contexts in which texts are read and the importance of textual authorities who offer their commentaries in public performances. While there are a multiplicity of approaches to the Mother and Sri Aurbindo, there are some common concepts and assumptions underlying people’s interpretive efforts. I discuss in particular the interplay between epistemologies of faith and reason that allow many Aurovilians to adopt an “objective” and even “scientific” stance towards ideas that one might otherwise consider incredible. At the same time, there are ongoing debates about how to locate Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in relation to other ideas. I examine the tensions that exist between seeing Integral Yoga as a fixed set of ideas, on the one hand, and placing value upon bringing the work of Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother into conversation with contemporary philosophical and spiritual approaches, on the other.

Having established the overall context for the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, I turn to examining the ways in which Aurovilians mobilize these texts in the public sphere in their efforts to shape the community’s development. First at issue is the power associated with citing specific passages in order to support or attack points of view or projects. I consider the varying modes of citational performances and how specific excerpts from respected texts accrue meaning in relation to particular contexts. I then turn attention to the problems of the collective interpretation and staging of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo that arise at the level where Auroville formulates and enforces its policies. By way of example of the social processes and formal structures the community must create to deal with these problems, I focus on the criteria and workings of Auroville’s official Entry Group that accepts or rejects new members of the community in light of the Mother’s statements about what it means to live in Auroville.

The Writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo

In acknowledging that reading is “socially framed,” one must recognize that “collective and institutional processes shape reading practices by authoritatively defining what is worth reading and how to read it” (Long 1994: 194). With respect to a religious or spiritual community, one assumes that “a canon is the result of a
deliberate attempt to collect, arrange and preserve the original message of a religious community, and to protect it against all corruption” (Stietencron 2001: 14). In Auroville, however, identifying a canon in the strict sense is not so easy. Since no one individual or group is uniformly accorded the authority to speak on behalf of the community as a whole and enforce policies, one cannot easily identify an “official” canon of works.

Having said this, there are many possible candidates for inclusion in a canon. Not only were Sri Aurobindo and the Mother prolific, they inspired several prolific writers amongst their devotees. Many of these works, such as those of M.P. Pandit or Nirodbaran, are widely read by other devotees. In Auroville, the man who served as Chairman of the Governing Board from 1999-2004, Kireet Joshi, has also produced numerous writings that many Aurovilians value.

Yet, not surprisingly, the works most commonly recognized as important for Auroville are those of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Everywhere you go in Auroville, you see quotations from these writings posted on bulletin boards, written on black boards, or popping up on screensavers. Notable examples are the chalkboards at the entrance of the Solar Kitchen or the Matrimandir office, where the management in those respective locations post daily a quotation from either the Mother or Sri Aurobindo. A friend of mine who worked at the Kitchen for some time felt the quotation thing was pompously spiritual. He told me that for a while he made a mockery of it by posting his own quotations – either of his own creation...
or from sources such as Che Guevara or Bob Marley – on a bulletin board also at the Kitchen entrance. I was told that for a time a comic, cartoon postcard that I had sent him, depicting a smoking congregation attending a ceremony conducted by a pope under a Marlboro banner, also appeared on the board. Sometimes the citations are extremely brief, as in the case of the framed page of the Mother’s original handwriting that reads, “Aspiration” hung in the kitchen of Auroville’s first community, named Aspiration by the Mother. Decorated daily with flowers, the page is not only a proud marker of the place’s history, it doubles as an artifact of the Mother herself, serving as a kind of conduit of her force. A less prominent example is the quotation that would appear in a “pop-up message” when one turned on one of the computers at the AV Today office. Unlike the other posts for a mass audience, these appeared with full citation of their exact textual location. Thus, because of the constant presence of the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in everyday life, they very much function as a canon.

A canon does not constitute a body of undifferentiated texts, however. Up to this point, I have spoken of the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother together. In as much as they together form one body of philosophical work, there are many similarities. On an institutional level, official versions of both are published exclusively by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The one notable exception is the work known as Mother’s Agenda (1981), which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4. The labor of collecting, transcribing, and editing works for publication
falls to the Ashram Archives, a highly organized institution which boasts a state-of-the-art cold storage for document preservation, as well as a team of sharp, dedicated editors, some of them foreign.

Differences between the work of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the processes of their publication are numerous, as are the perceptions that Aurovilians have about the content of their respective writings. In the case of Sri Aurobindo, given the volume of his output, the Ashram Archives is dedicated primarily to the care and preparation of his works. My friend Peter Heehs, an American who has worked in the Archives for decades, has told me that there are volumes of pages yet untouched. There are numerous challenges to the task of dealing with these writings. First, Sri Aurobindo’s handwriting is virtually unintelligible; Heehs is one of the few people who can make sense of it. Secondly, the writing is sprawled often on sundry pieces of paper, collected sometimes from various sources in the case of letters, hard to string together and creating difficulties for distinguishing one version of a piece from subsequent ones. Then there is the fact that towards the end of his life, Sri Aurobindo became blind and relied upon his disciple, Nirodbaran, to act as his scribe for completing his poem, Savitri. This adds another layer of complexity, as there are sometimes wordings that stand out to one well versed in Sri Aurobindo as perhaps the product of the inevitable changes that take place as a scribe commits an oral text to writing. Thus, Sri Aurobindo’s published
writings, taken by many readers as a kind of scripture, or fount of unmediated spiritual knowledge, actually entail a complex social process of production.

The Mother’s work is equally complicated, albeit for entirely different reasons. Much of what is published, appearing in complete in the series of volumes known as the *Collected Works of the Mother* (1977), are transcriptions of conversations, often originally in French, with various disciples and students over the years. Thus, the documents that encapsulate the Mother’s wisdom are most often insights that she offered to particular people in particular situations. One of the most comprehensive of the Mother’s texts, the *Agenda*, is the transcription of a series of conversations with a close confidant, Satprem. As Satprem became a controversial figure in the Ashram, for reasons I discuss in Chapter 4, and since he never made the recordings of the conversations accessible to others, the *Agenda* is not sold in the Ashram bookshop, nor is its reading officially endorsed there.

As for the overall content of the texts, with respect to Sri Aurobindo, the first thing to be noted is that all of his writings are in English. This was actually his first language, as he learned his family’s native Bengali only when he returned from his education in England as a young man. Secondly, Sri Aurobindo wrote most of his major prose works for his journal *Arya* between 1914 and 1920. The writings of the last thirty years of his life consist primarily of letters to devotees. The most notable exception is his epic poem *Savitri*, which he worked on up until the end of his life and which was published post-humously. As for the content of
his works, he does not deal much with the in's and out's of day-to-day living, although he did offer specific yogic guidance to his close disciples in his correspondence. His works frequently address abstract philosophical principles or involve the discussion of complex topics such as the essence and future of Indian culture. By way of illustration, the following passage, excerpted from the opening of *The Life Divine*, a dense text in which Sri Aurobindo establishes his theory of evolution, displays his eloquence, opacity, and cerebral approach:

We speak of the evolution of Life in Matter, the evolution of Mind in Matter; but evolution is a word which merely states the phenomenon without explaining it. For there seems to be no reason why Life should evolve out of material elements or Mind out of living form, unless we accept the Vedantic solution that Life is already involved in Matter and Mind in Life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled Life, Life a form of veiled Consciousness. And then there seems to be little objection to a farther step in the series and the admission that mental consciousness may itself be only a form and a veil of higher states which are beyond Mind. In that case, the unconquerable impulse of man towards God, Light, Bliss, Freedom, Immortality presents itself in its right place in the chain as simply the imperative impulse by which Nature is seeking to evolve beyond Mind, and appears to be as natural, true and just as the impulse towards Life which she has planted in certain forms of Matter or the impulse towards Mind, which she has planted in certain forms of Life. As there, so here, the impulse exists more or less obscurely in her different vessels with an ever-ascending series in the power of its will-to-be; as there, so here, it is gradually evolving and bound fully to evolve the necessary organs and faculties. As the impulse towards Mind ranges from the more sensitive reactions of Life in the metal and the plant up to its full organization in man, so in man himself there is the same ascending series, the preparation, if nothing more, of a higher and divine life. The animal is a living laboratory in which Nature has, it is said, worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious co-operation She will to work out the superman, the god. Or shall we not say, rather, to manifest God? For if evolution is the progressive manifestation by Nature of that which slept or worked in her, involved, it is also the overt realization of that which she secretly is. We
cannot, then, bid her pause at a given stage of her evolution, nor have we the right to condemn with the religionist as perverse and presumptuous or with the rationalist as a disease or hallucination any intention she may evince or effort she may make to go beyond. If it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth (1970d: 3-4).

The Mother, on the other hand, was very active in providing council on all kinds of practical issues facing both Ashramites and Aurovilians. Because she was available to answer questions on everything from education, to meditation, to proper diet, her words tend to be more worldly, prescriptive, and direct. She is not often as poetic or high-mindedly intellectual, although she frequently addressed complicated matters of occult significance. The following passage illustrates her down-to-earth mode, as she advises a student about the power of concentration. As shown here, her words often appear in publication along with the question put to her:

Q: When one works and wants to do one’s best, one needs much time. But generally we don’t have much time, we are in a hurry. How to do one’s best when one is in a hurry?

The Mother: It is a very interesting subject and I wanted to speak to you about it in detail, one day. Generally, when men are in a hurry, they do not do completely what they have to do or they do badly what they do. Well, there is a third way, it is to intensify one’s concentration. If you do that you can gain half the time, even from a very short time. Take a very ordinary example: to have your bath and to dress; the time needed varies with people, doesn’t it? But let us say, half an hour is required for doing everything without losing time and without hurrying. Then, if you are in a hurry, one of two things happens: you don’t wash so well or you dress badly! But there is another way – to concentrate one’s attention and one’s energy, think only of what one is doing and not of anything else, not to
make a movement too much, to make the exact movement in the most exact way, and (it is an experience lived, I can speak of it with certitude) you can do in fifteen minutes what you were formerly doing in half an hour, and do it as well, at time even better, without forgetting anything, without leaving out anything, simply by the intensity of the concentration. And this is the best answer to all those who say, “Oh, if one wants to do things well, one must have time.” This is not true. For all that you do – study, play, work – there is only one solution: to increase one’s power of concentration. And when you acquire this concentration, it is no longer tiring. Naturally, in the beginning, it creates a tension, but when you have grown used to it, the tension diminishes, and a moment comes when what fatigues you is to be not thus concentrated, to disperse yourself, allow yourself to be swallowed by all kinds of things, and not to concentrate on what you do. One can succeed in doing things even better and more quickly by the power of concentration. And in this way you can make use of work as a means of growth; otherwise you have this vague idea that work must be done “disinterestedly,” but there is a great danger there, for one is very quick to confuse disinterestedness with indifference (1977a: 137-138).

The fundamental differences in subject, style, and orientation between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s writings shape the ways in which the respective authors inform the ongoing performance of Auroville’s ideals. While not all Aurovilians may see things this way, there does seem to be a general sense that one reads Sri Aurobindo to gain insight into the path of Integral Yoga and to glimpse the panorama that looms on its horizon. One reads the Mother to help locate the guideposts and milestones that stand along that path. Aside from this very general distinction, there are innumerable ways in which readers approach these texts.

**Strategies for Reading**

In order to enact any written script, people must read it first and then only decide what to do with it. Aurovilians, however, generally seem to assume that the
writings that guide their performance possess an inherent meaning. The role of a reader is to seek out that meaning on its own clear terms. This view divorces the texts of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother from any social context and makes any individual reader’s intentions and life history irrelevant, although it is commonly understood that one must apply and live the teachings in ways appropriate to the context of one’s own life. In contrast, I am more interested in the act of reading. In other words, I am curious about how people in Auroville actually interact with essential written materials, rather than what the true meaning of them is, if such a thing can ever be known. In thinking about how Aurovilians create and experience a sense of belonging to a particular collective, reading the Mother and Sri Aurobindo constitutes a performative event through which Aurovilians affirm and contest the principles upon which their community is officially established. My thinking is indebted to Louise Rosenblatt’s work on poetry, in which she eschews the notion of the text as a close-ended static object, stating:

The poem […] must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text” (1978: 12).

One of the reasons why life in Auroville is so dynamic is the fact that there are so many different ways in which people “come together” with the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Unlike classical reader response theories which assume an “ideal reader,” I have always been amazed at the sheer variety of ways in which different Aurovilians read the same books. These many readings take
place on both individual and group levels. Both are important means for Aurovilians to not only pursue their own spiritual practice, but also to connect with the idea of belonging to something larger than themselves. For this reason, not to mention the fact that discovering the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother implies having been introduced to them by someone, even individual approaches to reading constitute social practices.¹ Aurovilians are members of what Stanley Fish has called an “interpretive community,” in that to live in Auroville implies being dedicated to producing meaning from a repertoire of central and more peripheral texts on an ongoing basis.²

The multiplicity of reading practices, interpretive strategies, and modes of performance makes it impossible for me, or anyone, to effectively make any sort of general claim of a single correct reading. As an interpretive community, however,

¹ For a long time literary theorists held the unquestioned assumption that reading was a solitary act. Based upon a more ethnographic model of research, some reception scholars have worked to construct what Leenhardt early on referred to as a “sociology of reading” (1980: 205-224). This context- centered approach emphasizes reading as a social process mediated by many factors.

² Fish’s idea, developed within the context of his analysis of how literature comes to be identified as such by literary critics, enables one to eschew static ideas about an ideal reader or a stable text. It enables one to come to terms with both the stability of interpretations among different readers and the possibility for disagreements. A community of readers is at once objective and subjective: “An interpretive community is not objective because as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view” (1980: 14).
Aurovilians do learn similar reading strategies and performative codes. In other words, there are commonly shared (even if not uniformly agreed upon) assumptions and conventions at play in approaching the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Generally speaking, these texts are not read in the same way as one would pick up just any book, but with the belief that these writings are “revealed truth.” This is in keeping with deeply rooted Indian traditions regarding “sruti” texts, believed to possess inherent power. Many, although by no means all, Aurovilians feel that the power of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo act through their writings and that as a result, such materials exert an influence over a reader that is independent of that reader’s conceptual frameworks, biases, level of language, etc. For many people there is an element of ritual involved in reading Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. They read them with attentiveness to the time of reading and to the feelings and inspirations invoked by that span of time. Reading “the works” is an activity to which many Aurovilians return again and again, whether they view it as a means for communing with greater forces or for grounding their spiritual aspirations in meditative routines. While the content of the writings is to varying

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3 My premise here is that the mental operations of any individual are shaped by the wider social world of which that person is a part. Even if infinite readings exist as a theoretical possibility, “there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts and media messages in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location. Similar readings are produced... because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes which they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter” (Radway 1998: 298).
degrees important to people, what is at the core of the matter goes far beyond what
the symbols on the page designate. Many Aurovilians feel that the texts of Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother are divinely inspired and direct testaments of the
consciousness of their more-than-ordinary authors.

The act of reading the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is something that takes
place on an individual level, as well as in larger, public forums. I will describe
these contexts first, before moving on to discuss the common themes that emerge.

*Individual Readings*

Reading on one's own in Auroville seems to be largely a private affair.
This may be in part due to the fact that there are few public spaces that would really
allow for someone sitting and reading. There are not, for example, shaded park
benches conducive to such. Nor are there large lobbies or waiting rooms, or the
subway platforms and bus rides that commonly provide opportunities for people to
read in other places. Contexts such as eateries do not seem to inspire such activity
either. For example, I have never seen anyone sitting and reading while eating
lunch in the Solar Kitchen. While there is an Auroville library, which is home to
many genres of books, as well as a book center known as the Library of Human
Evolution, which allows people to come and browse a range of spiritual literature,
reading done on one's own seems to take place largely in people's homes.
From what people say about their reading habits, it would seem that they have innumerable strategies for going about it, some constituting more formal, ritual performances than others. At the informal end of the spectrum are those who pick up the Mother or Sri Aurobindo on a kind of ad hoc basis. For example, a friend of mine would pick up his little copy of *Savitri* whenever the power went out and his television went off, dropping the book promptly the second electricity and more scintillating entertainment were restored. Alternatively, I observed another friend casually picking up a copy of Sri Aurobindo’s *Synthesis of Yoga* off his coffee table when he had a few minutes lull in his busy schedule. He skimmed through its pages with same air of ennui and inattentiveness with which one might flip through a cheap magazine while sitting in a doctor’s office. At the other end of the spectrum, there are people who formalize their reading, designating certain times of the day for it or preceding and/or following it with a period of meditative reflection. Some people told me that they simply sat at a desk chair, viewing the reading as an act of concentrated study. One such friend told me that she dedicated so much focus to her reading that it was an activity that she practiced only on and off, as she sometimes “needed a break.” Others, prefer to sit on the floor or on a cushion in an area of their living space they dedicate for meditative practices, often in front of an image of the Mother and/or Sri Aurobindo. Another friend designated the moment right as she woke up to reading, selecting a page at random with the idea of fate assigning her some particular idea to reflect upon and keep.
present with her throughout the day. She alternated between any one of the publications of Sri Aurobindo or the Mother that were stacked by her bed. I found myself conducting a similar ritual, although at the opposite time of the day. My nightly routine entailed opening at random a page from a compilation of Sri Aurobindo’s writings, a habit I formulated in the hopes that in sleep I would unconsciously process the material and thereby, access it on a deeper level. I had selected that particular work, because I liked the fact that it was arranged into fairly short passages, which made for an easy, brief reading and also because I found its mundane title, *The Practical Guide to Integral Yoga*, an amusing contrast to the abstract philosophy and challenging ideals contained between its covers. There are surely many other examples of still other styles of reading. The important point is that it is a highly idiosyncratic act, even as those idiosyncrasies are informed by a wider culture that promotes ideas about efficacious and appropriate reading.

It is very important to note that Aurovilians attribute varying degrees of importance to these practices. Officially, it is imperative to have a minimal working knowledge of the philosophical base of Auroville, and this can come only through reading the essential texts. I say “officially” here, since formal processes, such as the ongoing communications that Newcomers are expected to maintain with the Entry Group during their two-year probationary period emphasize the need to express an interest in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo through reading. One friend that I knew who was going through the process admitted to me that she did very
little reading, although she was ready with a quick response as to what text she was working her way through when it came to formal dialogues with Entry Group members. Obviously, institutional expectations aside, in real life reading occupies a varying level of priority for people. Consider the following answers from different Aurovilians in response to the question of what role their individual reading of the works of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo plays in their lives:

MARC⁴: A very important role but more as a landmark, guidance, and meditation than as, "OK, I’ll open this page and I will find my response.” Because I don’t believe anyway that it was their intention to have writings that would give the perfect answers to all questions. They want to show us the way for us to find the knowledge ourselves (2001).

RUBY: I do it as I need to. If I have some trouble, I try to find out something She might have said about such a thing. Or sometimes, I just open up the Agenda or Life Divine and read the first thing my eyes fall on and see what message is being given to me by the Divine (2000).

AL: To be honest, I don’t really understand anything they say. And I’m not sure anyone else does either. So, I’m not so into reading, even though I am doing it as a kind of spiritual discipline (2001).

While all three informants acknowledge the spiritual importance of ritualized reading of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, they use the same material to accomplish different ends. This brings up the question of what people believe they obtain by reading. As indicated by Rabinowitz, since any text is ambiguous—which means assuming that its meaning lies not in an authorial intention, but in the complex interplay between the written material, the reader and the social context of

⁴ To maintain the anonymity of all interviewees, I use pseudonyms throughout my dissertation. I use actual names only for public figures and published authors.
reading – different readers find different things in it and may use it to different ends (1987: 36-37). Both Marc and Ruby imply that the printed texts channel wisdom from a superhuman/divine source, but they hold disparate views about the directness of the kind of knowledge received. Ruby exemplifies the ways in which one individual may approach such texts in multiple ways. The “looking for guidance” strategy is reminiscent of the kind of exegesis one can expect from a conservative, Christian preacher, whose quotations and homilies drawn from the Bible are intended to serve as rubrics for correct living in the world. The “leaving it to fate” view of the content is a more magical approach. Unlike the logical or systematic means implied by exegesis, opening the page and seeing what one is “meant” to read is more on the order of an oracle, or tarot card reader, who trusts that destiny is the best authority. For Al, grasping the content is not so important at all. What is relevant is the discipline and focus of the act of reading.

All three views imply different scenarios when it comes to promoting specific activities, projects, or organizational structures in Auroville. Marc and Ruby probably represent the majority of Aurovilians who feel that there are particular, useful insights for developing and running Auroville that are gained in reading the texts of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. What exactly those insights are, however, is a source of contention. To begin with, there is the irresolvable issue of authorial intention. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are no longer physically present. They cannot interpret their own writings. So, how to know what they really meant?
Then, once intention is determined, how to know how best to enact it in daily life? The script for staging Auroville is constantly subject to such questions. Sometimes a textual authority is consulted in such matters. This brings the discussion to consideration of public forms of reading the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

**Public Readings**

Public readings assume many forms. Not all involve live performance. For example, the institution that houses French and English copies of *Mother’s Agenda*, known as the House of Mother’s Agenda, publishes a passage from either the Mother or Sri Aurobindo each week in the internally circulating newsletter, *AV News*. The woman who runs the institution selects the passages. I understand that they are widely read. One Aurovilian once remarked to me that this weekly input had become the only reading of the community’s philosophy that he did.

As for live reading events, public forums for reading aloud and discussing Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are an important component of Auroville’s social infrastructure. Such events allow Aurovilians to connect with one another as they engage in the common endeavor of studying or just plain appreciating the writings that have transformed each of their lives. Through these performances residents reaffirm both the central importance that these texts have for the community and the common ways of approaching them.
Most public readings are oriented around the input of a textual authority. As in any religious tradition once its founder is gone, Integral Yoga has produced a couple of generations of interpreters of the teachings. Usually they are in some way associated with the Ashram in Pondicherry. While these people are not Aurovilians, they play an important role in the reading life of many Aurovilians who attend their lectures or study groups. They make texts come alive through performance. Textual authorities can also embody the “fresh, legitimizing charisma” which Stietencron argues is necessary for “arousing new enthusiasm” in a religious community (2001: 32).

Sometimes public readings take place in Auroville itself. These readings assume varied forms. In August 2004 I attended a series of lectures delivered by Sraddhalu, a man in his late thirties who graduated from the Ashram School. Sraddhalu grew up in a household with a very close relationship to M.P. Pandit, a noted early, international lecturer on the teachings of Sri Aurobindo. A friend of mine who had been Sraddhalu’s schoolmate once told me that she had witnessed the process of his gradual transformation from being just another one of the “Ashram kids,” to becoming a respected authority on Integral Yoga. He certainly looks the part in as much as to my eye he conformed to what I would consider typical expectations in India and abroad as to how someone who speaks on spiritual matters should look. Sraddhalu’s hair falls in a thick cascade of wavy, black locks below his shoulders. His long beard, the trademark of many a sage, is tastefully
kempt. He does not wear ash on the forehead, as other religious leaders often do, which divest him of any particularly Hindu identity. Looking immaculate and elegant in a cream colored kurta and paijama, the traditional man’s clothes, his tall, slim frame cuts an impressive figure. Add to this his expressive hands that accompany his speech, and he conveys the very picture of authoritative grace. The talk I attended took place in the white conference hall of Savitri Bhavan, a building dedicated to providing a space for public readings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The lecture was quite a simple affair, in as much as there was no attempt to create an elaborate staging. Sraddhalu basically just sat on a chair at the front of the room, chanted “Om” three times and began talking to a rapt audience. The subject that day was the view of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on money. The basic principle Sraddhalu highlighted was their perspective that wealth could be an instrument for divine action. Its potential benefit for society could be realized only in as much as money circulated, rather than stagnate in deposits and investments. In his elaboration, Sraddhalu wove together quotations and his own commentary with basic facts about the complexity and injustices of the current global economy. In this way he put the teachings into a very contemporary framework which might appeal to people other than those already conversant with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Sraddhalu also emphasized that Integral Yoga did not glorify asceticism. In stating the yogic principles behind the cultivation of wealth, he seemed to encourage a mix of inner-growth and worldly success, something that
surely would make the talk attractive for many. Perhaps it was just the nature of that particular day’s talk, but I could see how Sraddhalu’s skillful elucidation of possible applications of Integral Yoga philosophy might appeal to worldly people from a range of cultural backgrounds. I understood what an Aurovilian friend of mine meant when he identified Sraddhalu as the “most polished and hip” of such people on the Aurobindonian circuit. It is not surprising that some Aurovilians find his input insightful and engaging.

I saw a different kind of public reading conducted by a very different textual authority back in 2000, when Chairman of the Governing Board, Kireet Joshi, gave a series of lectures on Sri Aurobindo’s highly philosophical text, *The Life Divine*, to secondary students in Auroville. The students were expected to attend, but the lectures were opened to anyone. They took place in the Pyramid shaped art building on one of the Auroville school campuses. Everyone sat on the floor, with the exception of the speaker, whose age merited a chair at the front of the room. The talk began with a flowery introduction of Joshi by one of the school teachers, who sat at his feet and glanced at him almost adoringly. A friend later commented to me that he found her statements unpalatably cloying and no doubt motivated by her desire to get on the good side of someone who had become quite a powerful figure in the community. Whatever the case, the whole set up had the feel of a discourse from a wise, old sage, rather than a high school class.
Joshi picked up where he had left off in the text from his previous session. It was obviously a slow going series. That day, in the hour and fifteen minutes that he spoke, Joshi managed to cover only a few sentences of *The Life Divine*. Each line of the book is conceptually rich and Joshi pulled together a wide range of other philosophical material in his explication, covering everything from Marx and Hegel to the ancient and influential Hindu sage, Adi Shankaracharya. Although presented in simple terms for a general audience, I began to wonder how the students were receiving this material. They seemed attentive and courteous, but as the minutes wore on, I saw some succumb to the soporific heat and stuffiness of the room. One who was sitting near me began to doodle a series of cartoon-like figures, and two others began passing notes back and forth. It did not seem surprising. My own attention moved in and out, and I was amazed that some of the students could remain attentive and even take lecture notes. Although Joshi did call for questions at the end – there did not happen to be any that day – the whole format of presentation was not particularly dynamic, but then that was not the point. *The Life Divine* is so dense and complicated that one needs some sort of a guide in getting through any of it. Listening to someone well-versed in it, and knowledgeable about other classical philosophies (although certainly no post-structuralist thought) can certainly make it more intelligible. But unlike the motivational speaker style of Sraddhalu, Joshi’s steady, even tone, references to people and ideas of the past, and occasional anecdotes about his experiences with the Mother, served to enshrine the
text within a framework of timeless scripture that could be approached primarily through devotion, even as he presented it in relation to intellectual discourses. For me, Joshi’s pontificating, sage-like persona did not allow me to access the text at any deeper level, or feel that it was in any way relevant to my own life. Both the content and format of the presentation seemed somehow at odds with everyday reality, rather than an effort to enlighten and uplift it. Some Aurovilians I spoke with felt the same way, one remarking that she regarded the whole thing as an exercise in displaying Joshi’s spiritual authority, rather than elucidating the text. But from the fact that the events were consistently well attended, I could only deduce that many people felt quite differently. Mira, a woman from the United States who has lived in Auroville over a decade commented to me, “He really makes the book come alive!” She went on to clarify that since the language of much of Sri Aurobindo’s writing was so demanding, she had never been able to get through any of his books on her own, for as many times over the years as she had tried. Being now able to make sense of passages was an experience on the order of a revelation to her: “When you don’t get it, you end up mystifying these things and then you don’t see how they can help you to understand the world and the Yoga.” Thus, for this woman, and others, the public readings reshaped individual readings.

Joshi is not respected solely for his skill as a lecturer. He is commonly regarded as someone in a unique position from which to insightfully comment upon the Mother’s statements about Auroville. Joshi administrated the Ashram School
under the Mother's direction for several years. As such, his work offered him many opportunities to interact with the Mother, as well as to explore her and Sri Aurobindo's writings in depth. I attended a talk Joshi gave in 1999, part of a series he launched ostensibly with the aim of getting people thinking about how best to get Auroville "back on track" of its original goals. This time it was not about delivering a didactic lecture, so much as it was about reminding residents about their goals, thereby attempting to intervene in the community. Deemed particularly pressing by Joshi and others at that time were the Mother's call for divine anarchy and that no money should circulate in Auroville. The talks took place on the roof of the Solar Kitchen, a spacious, informal, open-air area that can be most pleasant in the evenings when the sun begins to set and a gentle breeze blows. As it is not the usual location for hosting people in an official capacity, I presumed that organizers of the event intended that the Solar Kitchen provide an air of camaraderie and intimacy between the Chairman and residents of Auroville. The talks, which included a question-and-answer session, were long, but many people attended. People considered the talks interesting enough to warrant transcribing and circulating them.

Particularly interesting throughout was Joshi's frequent use of rhetorical strategies that highlighted his own charisma. Striving to gain a certain kind of credibility in front of his Aurovillian audience as he expounded on Sri Aurobindo, Joshi illustrated Bourdieu's argument that "...utterances are not only (save in
exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also *signs of wealth*, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and *signs of authority*, intended to be believed and obeyed" (1991: 66). In other words, what Joshi said was not just about what it seemed to be, but also was intended to showcase his authority to talk about it. Reminding listeners of the basis for his interest in and expertise on Auroville’s affairs was not peripheral to his expounding upon Sri Aurobindo’s ideas about human unity, but was an essential part of Joshi’s public exposition of canonical texts. In this kind of public reading Joshi’s intention was not merely to guide other readers in their study and appreciation of Sri Aurobindo’s writings, but to suggest ways to apply the philosophical principles. He elaborated upon particular interpretations of selected sections of specific texts, namely the *Ideal of Human Unity* and the *Human Cycle*, in the course of promoting specific activities that he deemed important priorities for the entire community. Examining such rhetorical strategies sheds light on ways people deploy texts in the creation, performance and exercise of power.

Foremost among the modes in which Joshi approached his material was the use of personal anecdotes that depicted his past association with Auroville, the Mother, and the Ashram. Interspersing his abstract discussion of quotations from Sri Aurobindo about human unity with vignettes in the first person, Joshi continually reminded his audience that he was not only an authority figure, but also a friend. For example, Joshi began his talk that day with the following statement:
The only truth about me is that I have loved Auroville with all my heart and beyond my heart. In 1969 I remember I had taken a group of students from the Ashram School, and right from the Ashram to Auroville we decided to shout as much as possible, with as much force as possible one slogan: “We shall build Auroville!” And I can tell you that this is all that inspires me. When Auroville was proposed by the Mother, you can’t imagine how much my heart rejoiced (1999: 1).

This cheery little opener was a guaranteed crowd pleaser. It not only underscored Joshi’s long history of commitment, but also conveyed heartfelt sentiments for a place that most audience members felt strong emotions for as well. Appealing to people on a personal, emotional level by sharing such carefully selected vignettes from his life history served to create an atmosphere of familiarity and intimacy in an environment that can be quite suspicious of government officials and all authority generally. The pervasive use of the term “bhai,” denoting “brother” in Hindi, in addressing Joshi at public events or informal conversation marked the widespread acceptance of him as a sympathetic and respected insider.

Joshi offered other kinds of anecdotes to different effect, however. Those drawn from actual time spent with the Mother made him somewhat larger than life:

Why children should not receive the best possible education in Auroville?
All of you are learned, educated, highly chiseled individuals. Why should children not get here everything that they need for education? Why should they go outside? In fact, Mother told me in 1969 when the parents of Auroville had approached me in the Center of Education in Pondy and gave me application forms for admission to children of Auroville in the Center of Education, and very innocently I received the applications from them and I took them to the Mother and I presented these applications to the Mother and even before looking into them, as soon as I said, “Here are the applications of the children from Auroville,” Mother didn’t look in to the applications and simply told me, “But you must create a school in Auroville!”—very forcefully. And that was a clear indication that Mother
wanted here in Auroville all the facilities that are necessary for children's
development. Now when I come here and I find that many children are
being sent away to ordinary schools; and we are here to create a new system
of education, new completely, which the world can follow [...] I have been
in touch with the children of Auroville, beautiful, marvelous, precious,
'sun-eyed children,' really sun-eyed children. Why should they not receive
all their nourishment from here? [...] I cannot, honestly, understand (10).

Here Joshi counted on the kind of respect that Aurovilians commonly accord to
persons having direct experience with the Mother. People may view such persons
as being in a unique position from which to comment upon the Mother's
statements, something that Joshi seems to realize in stating that he witnessed a
'clear indication' of one of the Mother's intentions for Auroville. Occupying a
position of having no doubt as to what the Mother wanted allowed him the leverage
to all but scold Aurovilians for not living up to the founder's true goals. The
scolding, mild as it was, was tempered by Joshi's affirmation about the special
qualities of Auroville's children, something that many Aurovilians seem to believe
from comments I often heard to that effect.

All of this provided an appropriate backdrop for Joshi's own vision for
Auroville's development. Promoting higher education in Auroville was one of
Joshi's primary pet projects. During his tenure he championed the enormous
Center for International Research in Human Unity, for which the government of
India sanctioned some 25 lakhs of rupees. Much of the support he garnered from
within the community for his vision of the Center and higher studies generally

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stemmed from his having directed the Ashram School under the Mother herself, as he affirmed in his talk and many other occasions.

Finally, Joshi offered vignettes from the days of his political career that consolidated his image as a man committed to Auroville and as a man who could get things done. During the “Question and Answer” session, he stated:

You know, when the Auroville Act was on the anvil for the Government of India, I had the privilege of having been invited by the Prime Minister to address the Cabinet where all the Cabinet Ministers were present, and this is a rare privilege, because usually, in the Cabinet meeting excepting the Cabinet Secretary, no other person is allowed to be present, whereas here she asked me to come. I was sitting in her office, she sent a note to her private secretary saying, “You send Kireet Joshi here.” The honor with which she asked me to speak on Auroville was that she first of all made me seated next to her. All the Cabinet ministers were seated exactly as you are seated now [...] Indira Gandhi was sitting and as I am sitting now I was made to sit, next to her, and then she said, “Kireetji, now explain to all the Ministers here -- Auroville.” And I took nearly twenty minutes. I was given twenty minutes to speak to the Cabinet Ministers. And during that time, I had the opportunity of telling Ministers about the Charter of Auroville, which in itself is revolutionary (7).

The story continued and culminated with the surprising support that the Indian government showed for Auroville in passing the Auroville Foundation Act that guaranteed the community protection at a critical period in its development. Thus, while the story was superficially about politics, it had spiritual overtones as it stood as proof of the divine force behind Auroville’s destiny that could propel the community forward and through the most difficult of obstacles. Joshi stood as both an instrument in this story, as well as a kind of hero. Although Aurovilians might
be suspicious of other politicians, here was one who had more than proven his dedication to a higher cause, as well as his effectiveness.

From what I gathered from different people in informal conversations, the talks instigated a brief, renewed enthusiasm for participating in community meetings. They also in part inspired the enactment of new attempts to stage Auroville’s script, such as the Circles project that conceived of itself as a step towards eliminating the circulation of money in Auroville, one of the Mother’s stated goals and one of the points that Joshi voiced feeling strongly about in several of his public appearances. People also seemed pleased at Joshi’s obvious interest in and sympathy for Auroville. Past Chairmen had been less versed in the philosophy and moreover, had spent much less time in the community. Joshi, despite his years, made so many trips from Delhi that a residence was constructed for him in Auroville.

There were, however, people I knew who viewed the Solar Kitchen talk with suspicion. One friend commented, “The guy is a career politician. He knows how to talk.” For such critics Joshi’s continuous alignment of himself with the Mother and his expounding upon Sri Aurobindo were not worthy of respect. They were to be viewed as an effective strategy for garnering a base of support based upon attributes generally admired amongst Aurovilians.

Thus, textual authorities do not receive unanimous support. While those who knew the Mother personally continue to receive respect for their experiences,
many people do not hold their input to be invaluable. Some people pointed out to me that since both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother frequently offered new meanings for their works as their own experiences expanded and evolved, the knowledge of people who knew them was not always relevant. A good case in point, which I discuss at length in Chapters 5 and 7, is the figure of Roger Anger, the man with whom the Mother worked closely on her urban plan for Auroville. The fact that he had been chosen by the Mother herself and had spent so much time with her are grounds for many people to accord a considerable amount of authority to Roger in his interpretations of the Mother’s documented words about how her city and the temple and gardens standing at its center should be. Other people feel that if the Mother were alive today, she would have wanted something different. For these people what Roger thinks is appropriate – based on conversations he had long ago – carries little weight.

It is certain that the kind of respect textual authorities are given can depend upon the context of the statements that they make. For example, Joshi, widely regarded as knowledgeable about Sri Aurobindo’s writings and a helpful guide in reading them, is worth listening to as a lecturer. In contrast, when it comes to performances that aim to pronounce how particular passages should shape developments in Auroville, there might be more reserve on the part of more Aurovilians as to how much weight his insight carries. To conclude, while public readings are an important venue for sharing and communicating common interests
and goals, they are also performances of power. They can become opportunities for affirming or contesting particular interpretations of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and their application in everyday life. They are ultimately perhaps more about the speaker and his/her audience, than about the philosophy itself.

Approaching the Content: Faith and Reason

In examining the various reading strategies some common themes and problems emerge. Whether on the individual or group levels, the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo present the reader with a series of interpretive challenges. First, there is the fact that many things they say do not fit easily with ordinary, rational discourses. This makes it difficult to make sense of certain passages. One must read these texts from the vantage of faith rather than logic. For example, there is a brief section in the Agenda from June 1965 in which the Mother relates a vision about a time in the near future when Auroville's infrastructure would be so sophisticated that the Olympic Games would take place there. The incredible passage reads as follows:

Then in the north (that’s where there is the most space, naturally) in the direction of Madras: the cultural zone. There, an auditorium (the auditorium I have dreamed of doing for a long time: plans had already been made), an auditorium with a concert hall and grand organ, the best you find now (it seems they make wonderful things). I want a grand organ. There will also be a theater stage with wings (a revolving stage and so on, the very best you can find). So, here, a magnificent auditorium. There will be a library, there will be a museum, exhibition rooms (not in the auditorium in addition to it), there will be a cinema studio, a cinema school; there will be a gliding club. Already we almost have the government’s authorization and
promise – anyway it’s already at a very advanced stage. Then, towards Madras, where there is plenty of space, a stadium. And a stadium that we want to be the most modern and the most perfect possible, with the idea (an idea I’ve had for long time) that twelve years (the Olympic Games take place every four years), twelve years after 1968 (in 1968 the Olympiad will be held in Mexico), twelve years after, we would have the Olympic Games in India, here. So we need space (AV Press n.d.: 18).

I asked two friends to give their opinions about this far-fetched passage. The first was a young, well-educated North Indian woman, the second a middle-aged, professional European man. Both have lived in Auroville for many years:

BANI: You know, sometimes I read some of this stuff and I just have to skip over it because I find myself starting to think that the Mother was some kind of a crackpot! I fully accept them [Sri Aurobindo and Mother] as avatars, but sometimes you really don’t know what to do with this stuff (2000).

THOMAS: We have to remember that She is talking about things on another plane of consciousness that does not correspond to the physical laws we know in the material reality. It is not possible from this limited perspective to understand these things (2000).

Reading and interpretation thus involve not only attentiveness, but also the ability to ignore things. For these readers the locutionary force of the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is of lesser importance than the perlocutionary power the words have for manifesting higher levels of consciousness in the world. This relates back to the comments of Readers 2 and 3 about their reading strategies that I have mentioned in a previous section. Reader 2 believed that the writings have the built-in power to reveal their own correct experience and interpretation. Reader 2 was committed to the practice of reading the works for reading’s sake, as a spiritual discipline rather than for comprehension in the rational sense of the word. Both
approaches share the premise that the essential value of the works of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo lies in a realm not subject to so-called objective criteria. That this kind of truth must be accessed through faith and surrender does not make it less real. It is, in fact, more real.

_Beyond Man’s Spirituality and Research_

While many people take things on faith, there is a desire on the part of some readers to relate Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to conceptual frameworks based upon reasoning and research. One very public figure in this line is long-time Aurovilian, Georges Van Vrekhem. Van Vrekhem has published two books based upon extensive research: _Beyond Man: The Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother_ (1997) and _The Mother: The Story of Her Life_ (2000), both aimed at examining the spiritual research and work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in light of their life histories and historical circumstances. I discuss these writings at length here, as they vividly exemplify the interplay between an epistemology of faith and one of reason, a theme that echoes across many aspects of life in Auroville. Moreover, the act of writing these books is in my view a kind of interpretive performance in its own right, in the line of the oral public readings discussed earlier. Reading the Mother and Sri Aurobindo inspires, among innumerable other activities, the impulse to create texts about their writings. This unique form of cultural production is an effort to embody the teachings, in as much as it is a
common belief – although not monolithic – that part of being a practitioner of Integral Yoga means engaging with the texts of the founders. While some people do this on their own in private, others opt to disseminate their interpretations in a medium that allows them to communicate with numbers of people throughout the world.

Van Vrekhem’s books reach a wide audience as they have been translated into several European languages from the original Dutch. Many people, in Auroville and the Ashram, regard them as authoritative. In the course of this discussion I will focus exclusively on the first, *Beyond Man*. Reviews of the book gave a clear portrait of the kind of respect the books command. To cite an important example, Carel Thieme, an editor of *AV Today*, wrote in the internationally circulating magazine, *Mother India*:

> The book is so informative and thought-provoking that its length feels rather like a bonus than an ordeal. It has clearly been the aim of the author to write an integral catholic text about his subject based on all the ‘documents’ available.[…] The inclusion of interesting historical, philosophical and spiritual vistas drawn from other sources has resulted in a richly embroidered tapestry as a background to the exceptional life of the Two-in-One, ‘the double-poled Avatar of the Supermind’ as Van Vrekhem calls Sri Aurobindo and the Mother[…] Beyond Man is a standard piece and a fount of information on the life and work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (1998: 62-64).

Such praise in a widely accepted “Aurobindonian” journal indicates that Van Vrekhem’s work touches on common ways of articulating and appreciating the philosophy.
The book was not without critics, however. Van Vrekhem himself related to me over lunch in 2002 that shortly after publication he received a series of anonymous phone calls from a shadowy voice who condemned his works in crude terms. Based on some long standing debates with certain members of the Auroville community, Van Vrekhem was certain that the responsible party was a member of a small group of long-time French residents. This group was known for particular views on a range of subjects, most notably about the man who published the *Agenda*, Satprem, as well as the issues surrounding the Mother’s passing in 1973 (something I will discuss in Chapter 4). Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that the public interpretation of the lives and writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is a serious endeavor that motivates people in all kinds of directions.

*Beyond Man*, is both a historical and philosophical exploration. Van Vrekhem presents the life histories of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, details interesting “real life” and occult events from their Ashram days, and lays out the essential themes of their published works in a style that is both engaging and easy to read. The following excerpt, which I reproduce here at length, gives a good sense of Van Vrekhem’s thorough, yet accessible tone, even when speaking of incredible things. The subject of the passage is Sri Aurobindo’s unique participation in historical events:

And then to think that the Gaekwad of Baroda, Mohandas K. Ghandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and so many others were of the opinion that Aurobindo Ghose had withdrawn in a mystical cloud-world. A mystic he was, Sri Aurobindo, and one of a very high order, but not of the nebulous, unearthly
type. ‘My gaping wounds are a thousand and one…’ His yoga was a battle, in which no quarter was given, against the allied hostile forces and for the growth of humanity. His correspondence was a means of direct contact with and a transmission of forces to the human elements who had felt the call to participate in that battle; without the spiritual force accompanying the letters, the written word would have been but of little use. In the meantime, Sri Aurobindo worked with his yogic powers on the events and personalities of Earth, on everything that fulfilled a key-role on this momentous turning point in evolution [...] The yogic force is a real, concrete force. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother could not possibly do their work without acquiring that force and without the ability to use or apply it. For they had come to transform the Earth [...] The unifying world suffered the labour pains of the birth of a new era – from the beginning of the century, actually. A.B. Purani has noted down Sri Aurobindo’s words spoken to a few confidants: ‘It would look ridiculous and also arrogant if I were to say that I worked for the success of the Russian revolution for three years. Yet I was one of the influences that worked to make it a success. I also worked for Turkey.’ In December 1938, Sri Aurobindo once more talked about his work in the world to the handful of disciples gathering every evening in his room. His assessment, as somewhat roughly noted down by Purani: ‘[When] I have tried to work in the world, results have been varied. In Spain I was splendidly successful [at that time]. General Miaja [i.e. Miaja, the defender of Madrid] was an admirable instrument to work on. [The] working of the Force depends on the instrument [...] Egypt was not successful. Ireland and Turkey were tremendously successful. In Ireland I have done exactly what I wanted to do in Bengal (177-178).

One of Van Vrekhem’s primary, writing strategies entails subjecting material, which would strike many non-believers as pure fantasy, to a rigorous, quasi-academic mode of inquiry. Even as he argues that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were living embodiments of the Divine (avatars), he locates his material within a conceptual framework of “objectivity.” Throughout the book, Van Vrekhem achieves this effect by deploying standard methodological and literary devices.
To begin with, the extensive use of a wide variety of primary and secondary source materials stands as proof that Van Vrekhem’s book is the result of a sustained, systematic process of research. The endnotes that assiduously document references suggest that the project conforms to standard conventions of investigative rigor. This stands at odds with many other publications and pamphlets about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother that I have seen over the years, which often do not specify the exact origin of quotations and citations.

Van Vrekhem does not write in the first person but in a disembodied “scholarly” voice that creates the impression that the subject under scrutiny is one of unquestionable truth, rather than a product of the discussion and argumentation of its author. That the truths revealed are universal in nature is underscored by the occasional strategic use of the third person plural. For example, in discussing the ideas of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo about rebirth and their proposition that the psychic being of each individual chooses the life it leads according to what it needs for its development, Van Vrekhem inclusively states: “This means that we should not put the blame for being here on anyone else: we have willed and picked everything ourselves, and the adversities we may be cursing are unconsciously a source of the intense joy of becoming” (95).

Another significant strategy is to contextualize the words of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in light of what is known of historical figures and events from other sources. In particular is the chapter devoted to Adolf Hitler, about whom both the
Mother and Sri Aurobindo had spoken at length, explaining his erratic behavior and unfathomable wickedness in occult terms. According to them, Hitler had become possessed by a being of vast darkness, who was an emanation of one of the original, four Asuras (demons or devils in Sanskrit and always capitalized by Sri Aurobindo) known as the Lord of Nations. These are not asuras commonly mentioned in Indian lore, but are rather dark forces that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother identified in their occult explorations of the many planes of existence exerting influence upon the earth. Essentially they are the first beings in creation, who in their original forms embodied the qualities of Truth, Light, Bliss and Immortality respectively, but had since decayed into their opposites (much like the fall of Lucifer in the Bible) and were determined to impede the evolutionary process on earth. Van Vrekhem cites one of the conversations the Mother held with Ashram youth, later published as a series known as Entretiens, in which she relates:

Hitler was a medium, a first rate medium. He has become possessed during spiritistic séances. It is then that he became seized by crises which were thought to be epileptic. Actually they were not, they were crises of possession [...] It was therefore that he had that kind of power, which in fact was not very great. But when he wanted to know something from that Power, he went to his castle to 'meditate,' and there he addressed a very intense appeal to what he called his 'god,' his supreme god, who was the Lord of the Nations [...] This was a being [...] he was small, and he appeared to him in a silver amor with a silver helmet and a golden aigrette. He looked magnificent. And he appeared in such a blinding light that the eyes could hardly look at him and bear the brilliance. He did not appear

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5 For the Mother's detailed thoughts on the Asuras, see the questions and answers as they appear in the Mother 2002: 201-206.
physically, of course: Hitler was a medium, he ‘saw.’ He had a certain clairvoyance. And it was in those cases [when meeting the Lord of the Nations] that he suffered his crises: he rolled about on the floor, he slavered, he bit in the carpets – it was a terrible state he was in. The people around him knew that (223-224).

Van Vrekhem corroborates what the Mother detailed about Hitler with the published observations of other people, most notably a statement from Hermann Rauschning, the former head of the government of Danzig. Rauschning relates in detail how Hitler would rise as if possessed in the night, convulsed by seizures, uttering unintelligible phrases, stricken with fear and certain that an invisible entity was present in the room (221).

Van Vrekhem explains that the Mother and Sri Aurobindo followed the events of World War II closely, as they perceived the situation as a threat to the world and to the whole future of humanity (236). More significantly, they “intervened in countless big and small events during the war” (244). Eventually, around June 20, 1941 the Mother turned things around in a big way, appearing to Hitler in the form of the Lord of the Nations and convincing him successfully to invade Russia. Van Vrekhem cites the Mother’s narration of this event as it appears in the Agenda from a conversation in 1961:

It was the Lord of the Nations, the being that appeared to Hitler [...] And I knew when they were going to have their next meeting (for, after all, he’s my son, that’s what was so comical!). So, for once I took his place and became Hitler’s god, and I advised him to attack Russia. Two days afterwards, he attacked Russia. But on leaving the meeting, I met the other one [the Asura] who came to his appointment! He was rather furious. He asked me why I had done such a thing. I answered: “That is none of your business – because it had to be done.” Then he replied: “Wait and see. I
know -- I know! -- that you will destroy me, but before being destroyed, I will cause as much damage as possible, you may be sure of it.” Then I came back from my nocturnal outings and told everything to Sri Aurobindo. That kind of life! [...] People do not know what is going on. They know nothing. Nothing. (243).

Thus, drawing together a range of primary and secondary source material, Van Vrekhem corroborates the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s statements with factual details, establishing in several pages that this fantastic version of historical events is completely real. He adds that “the so-called ‘objective’ historians do not have the necessary norms, knowledge or insight to appraise this sort of data” and that “the norms of rationalistic historical writing are always too superficial to explain the forces behind the past event” (227). Here the material is presented as more logical and accurate than other accounts of the period.

Perhaps the strongest strategy aimed at realizing a particular brand of objectivity is to flat-out compare the material with findings in the sciences. In the case of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s ideas, the comparison is somewhat natural, as the two resonate fully with ideas about physical evolution. Furthermore, their refusal to negate the experience of the material world, in favor of some otherworldly nirvana, makes evaluating their thought in relation to what we know of physical laws a logical step. It is not simply that what they write about can be translated into scientific terms, but rather that they go beyond even the most cutting-edge scientific developments. For example, in discussing the Mother’s descriptions of her experience of the supramental transformation of the cells in her
body, Van Vrekhem explains: “At first she described that substance as dots in all
colours of the rainbow, every dot being of one single colour; that substance was a
sort of powder consisting of atoms or dots, apparently immobile but with an
incredible intensity of vibration, ‘that moves and does not move.’ (This is now one
of the accepted paradoxes of modern physics)” (434).

With respect to the Mother’s death, Van Vrekhem asserts that she was
indeed successful in achieving a supramental transformation, but that the time has
not yet come in evolution when a supramentalized body can manifest in the
physical world as we know it. He offers the biological metaphor of the caterpillar
and the butterfly, stating:

Can one say that the caterpillar dies? It lives on in the butterfly. Nothing
had died there except an old manner of existing. What to the
comprehension of the caterpillar-world is death, is in fact a transmutation of
life into another manner of existence (498).

That anyone would believe that the Mother would actually remain permanently in
the physical form by which she had come to be known by her devotees, as, indeed,
many of them did think before her departure, Van Vrekhem dismisses as “the naïve
belief in a visible supramental miracle” (492). He holds that these are precisely the
kind of miraculous and mythical minded statements that the Mother and Sri
Aurobindo abhorred.

Against the flakiness of religious thought, Van Vrekhem considers the
“rational elaboration” of Sri Aurobindo’s vision, his insistence on keeping an eye
on concrete experience, and his favoring of “spiritual positivism”: “For questions
about humankind and its origins arise in everybody’s mind, and explanations provided by religion are, for the most part, so unreasonable that they invariably lose out against the arguments of science, which make the scientific view look irrefutable” (77).

Seeing the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in relation to science, and even beyond it, is a fundamental way in which many Aurovilians approach their philosophy. For some, this “rational” dimension draws them to the Yoga.

Consider the following statements, the first from a European and the second from a North Indian, both long-time residents of Auroville and highly educated men:

THOMAS: When I first read Life Divine, well I didn’t understand much of it and still don’t. But you know I was a lawyer, a very good one, well educated, with a very developed mind and I thought it was simply the best explanation I had read for the origin of the universe and natural evolution. So, I wanted to read more (2000).

INDRAJIT: I am a scientist! By my professional training, it would be impossible; it would be against my very nature to believe in this god or that god. Sri Aurobindo is the only kind of “religion” — and of course we can’t call it that — that I can tolerate (2002).

Although Aurovilians recognize that much of what they take on faith cannot be scientifically demonstrated to a wider audience of non-believers, many still strive to align themselves with generally accepted logical principles. In this way, they hope to distance themselves from other spiritual practices that place more emphasis upon miracles, devotion to gods and goddesses, and gurus. Books like Van Vrekhem’s, and other means of logically proving the truth of the statements of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, are performances that emphasize that the ultimate aim
of the practice of Integral Yoga is to transform everyday life in tangible ways, rather than remain content with a faith in a mysterious reality that exists beyond. Thus, in his emphasis on research and systematic analysis, even when discussing something as difficult for a rational mind to believe as that the Mother appeared to Hitler, Van Vrekhem is appealing to one of the primary concepts in the repertoire of elements that many Aurovilians incorporate into formulating how they see themselves in relation to others.

Religion or Dogma?

For some Aurovilians, taking a rational approach to spirituality is a means of aligning oneself with the experiential and self-questioning spirit in which the Mother and Sri Aurobindo themselves approached their work. Their open-mindedness and willingness to modify their own principles is seen as the antithesis of the conventional religious mindset that both founding figures of Auroville eschewed. In fact, the Mother stated clearly that the days of religion as an expression of truth were over:

Religion exists almost exclusively in its forms, its cults, in a certain set of ideas, and it becomes great only through the spirituality of a few exceptional individuals, whereas true spiritual life, and above all what the supramental realization will be, is independent of every precise, intellectual form, every limited form of life. It embraces all possibilities and manifestations and makes them the expression, the vehicle of a higher and more universal truth. A new religion would not only be useless but very harmful. It is a new life which must be created; it is a new consciousness which must be expressed. This is something beyond intellectual limits and mental formulae. It is a living truth which must manifest (2002: 296).
Many Aurovilians share this opinion. As a middle-aged, German, explained to me:

KARL: If we take Sri Aurobindo saying everything about everything, then it's like people who read the Bible or Quran and don't think they have to think any further. But the main theme of this Yoga is 'evolution!' Just look at the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and you see that they were changing them all the time. They were evolving. Sri Aurobindo was writing a long time ago. The world, with globalization and all, has changed a lot since then. To think that the seeds of his ideas haven't grown since then is like to be some kind of religious dogmatic (2003).

For this Aurovilian and others, grounding the practice of Integral Yoga in a strongly non-religious stance means seeking new relevance for its application to contemporary situations. It is also means viewing the philosophical principles -- and hence the script for manifesting Auroville -- in light of secular currents of thought.

An important figure who some of these Aurovilians look to for inspiration is the contemporary American philosopher, Ken Wilber (born 1949). Although he has decried such designations, Wilber is popular on the so-called New Age circuit. In particular, he is associated with the school of thought known as “transpersonal psychology,” which emerged during the 1960s and is explicitly concerned with spirituality. A medical school, and later biochemistry graduate school drop out, Wilber has written some sixteen books on spirituality and science, his most popular titles including *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977), *The Atman Project* (1980) and *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* (1995). Part cultural historian, critic, anthropologist, philosopher, and psychologist, Wilber is particularly known for his
dense, detailed explication of the nature of consciousness. He is, in fact, commonly referred to as the “Einstein of consciousness.” In the course of his examinations, Wilber integrates both Eastern and Western psychology, including everything from psychoanalysis, Zen, Jungian analysis, Gestalt, tantra, transcendental meditation and much more. Part of this “much more” is Sri Aurobindo. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Wilber acknowledges his debt to Sri Aurobindo’s ideas, especially about involution and evolution, in the formulation of his own ideas of various levels of consciousness. For example, Wilber states in the course of establishing his own developmental view of consciousness, “Sri Aurobindo, India’s greatest modern sage, has written on just this viewpoint -- Brahman getting lost in involution and then evolving back - from matter to prana to mind to over-mind to super-mind and Atman, and he sees it occurring cosmologically as well as psychologically” (1980: 313). That those who appreciate Aurobindo would find Wilber’s work interesting, is, thus, easy to imagine. Neither is it surprising that some of these people have sharply criticized Wilber, alleging that he misuses Sri Aurobindo by rarely quoting him directly, misrepresenting some of what he had to say in the course of supporting his own arguments (Hemsell 2002).

In Auroville I have heard people speak both ways about Wilber. No matter what side they choose, those Aurovilians who read Wilber’s books tend to be well educated with a strong command of English. They also tend to be Westerners,
perhaps because Wilber’s own cultural orientation makes him particularly appealing to those coming from Europe and the United States. Discussions amongst Wilber’s Aurovilian readers take place informally and never – to my knowledge – in the lecture format in which many speakers discuss the works of Sri Aurobindo or the Mother.

When I asked a friend whether she felt it possible to openly refer to Wilber in very public forums, she replied that while she never felt her reading of him would be something she would seek to hide from others, she figured that citing him in a formal meeting about the community would likely meet disapproval from several people. This attitude suggests an unspoken rule at Auroville. Although there is nothing in the Mother’s writings dealing with the topic of what can and cannot be openly discussed, many people I spoke with strongly believed that Auroville should exclusively promote the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The emphasis on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s works is reflected in all aspects of Auroville’s life, from the inclusion of their texts in the high school curriculum, to the insistence that all applicants to the community develop a working knowledge of their teachings, to the display of quotations from their works in many public places. Yet despite their ever-presence, some people think that the position of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the community needs protection.

An incident that revealed the strength of this attitude in an extreme way took place in 1999. The matter concerned the entrance into Auroville of some
people who began openly professing and promoting the activities of the Sahaj Maarg, an international spiritual organization under leadership of Chennai-based guru, Sri Parthasarathi Rajagopalachari, known affectionately as “Chariji.” Based upon a system of meditation that involves the direct transmission of energy from master to student, Sahaj encourages followers to become “preceptors” who are authorized to spread the transmission and teachings to others. In the words of an Aurovilian friend highly skeptical of the organization, Sahaj constitutes a kind of “spiritual Amway.” When some adherents to this faith showed up in Auroville as long-term guests and began actively seeking to initiate Aurovilians into the Sahaj meditation system, some residents were alarmed. From what I could gather from friends after the fact, some people feared that allowing people like this to operate in Auroville would open up the community to the possibility of becoming attractive to adherents of all kinds of teachings and faiths. Based on a “slippery slope” kind of logic, some people felt strongly that allowing people to publicly promote other organizations would diminish the spirit of the Mother’s own vision for Auroville. Eventually, in what was a natural course of action to some and to others a “witch hunt” disproportionate with what had occurred, Auroville’s Working Committee asked the Sahaj people to leave.

This was, of course, an extreme example. But the fact that “outside” ideas can elicit charged emotions is real. Shakti, a middle-aged North Indian woman who had lived first in the Ashram and then Auroville for many years, related to me
how she felt once in a meeting where, from her point of view, everything but the relevant ideas of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were being discussed:

I stood up in that meeting. I mean, I had been quiet before. But then they just kept talking about all these other things and I felt sick. I stood up, I was almost in tears and just said, "Can’t we at least save a place for Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in Auroville (2000)?

While not many people might feel the same urgency as this woman, I definitely got the sense from several people that there is concern that not enough people are conversant in the core ideas that comprise the community’s original philosophical base. A long-time French Aurovilian, Michelle, remarked to me that it was not a question of imposing these writings on others, but simply that the purpose of Auroville was to manifest Mother’s Dream and that becoming an Aurovilian meant signing up for that specifically. She said, "We’re not forcing people to become Aurovilians. It is just that this place is about this kind of idea.” In other words, the script for performing a very particular vision of society is a finished product that need not be altered or added to in any way.

People who espouse this view do not see themselves as religious in any way. Yet some Aurovilians identify them as such. Padmanabha, a South Indian artist, commented on the issue as follows:

These people, they come here in the 60s with that whole idealistic dream. Then they have Mother and Sri Aurobindo all fucked up in the head. They can’t see it as anything other than a religion. This is how spirituality is in the West and they can’t get over it. Westerners always have to have the truth on their side (2001).
Wilber’s readers that I know might identify others as religious, although not for the same generalized cultural reasons of this artist. Wilberians believe that people who would discount the value of reading outside the official canon of Aurovilian philosophy actually directly contradict the insistence of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo on not being dogmatic. Wilber’s vocabulary becomes a means by which some Aurovilians distinguish themselves from those they perceive as dogmatic. A Newcomer who has read several of Wilber’s books explained this to me as follows:

S.P.: How do you account for people, in your view, having a dogmatic attitude to Mother and Sri Aurobindo, when the two of them specifically did not want this?

MAURICE: You know, Wilber has this thing he talks about as the “pre-transitive” mind. It’s basically the lowest beginnings of mental and cultural development. People grab on to ideas and make them true above any other idea. They accept things without questioning. This is how a lot of religion is. Here in Auroville, you have a lot of people at that level of the mind, but then they grab on to Sri Aurobindo and think that they’ve gone beyond the mental plane (2001).

Reading and discussing Wilber allows people to carve out what they perceive as their own unique role in the development of the community. Again in Maurice’s words:

People like us are sort of a new generation of people coming to Auroville. In order to be pioneers, in the past you needed people who were so convinced of the ideals that they were willing to do anything. Now new things are required. The world is smaller. There are lots of ideas out there that are relevant to Auroville’s global vision. We’re bringing those ideas here with us, even though we believe in the validity and genius of the Mother.

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Thus, while the works of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo circulate as points of reference that Aurovilians have in common, private reading practices of alternative texts, and the corresponding informal discussions about them, allow people to formulate identities that differentiate them from what they perceive to be hegemonic ideas about being an Aurovilian.

It is important to note at this juncture that while Aurovilians fall on all sides of the debate as to whether Auroville’s official canon should be open or set, one of the great strengths of the community is that there are no hard and fast rules about such matters. More importantly, there is no comprehensive effort at mind control. Aurovilians as a whole are extremely anti-authoritarian. It would be hard to imagine any one body of influence holding sway over significant numbers of people’s thinking and interpretation of texts for very long.

Mobilizing Texts in the Public Sphere

Having addressed the various ways in which the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are read and how people think about the importance of these texts for their individual lives and the community as a whole, I will now turn my attention to how these writings inform people’s efforts to accomplish material aims in Auroville. In other words, I will examine how people relate to essential texts that comprise the script for realizing Auroville in the course of creating and administering projects and policies. In a sense, this entire dissertation is about precisely this. In
subsequent chapters I will examine in detail instances of how specific passages of
text are interpreted and performed in the course of a range of activities in everyday
life. What I hope to do here is to describe some of the mechanisms through which
people mobilize texts for specific ends, and to elaborate upon the repeating issues
and conflicts that arise in the context of interpreting and staging the community’s
scripted ideals.

Powers of Citation

The first issue to address in thinking about how people use writings in order
to get things done is the power associated with citing specific passages from the
Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Excerpts from the canonical writings play a pivotal
role in the efforts of individuals or groups to live their daily lives, to bring about
change in the community, to attack current activities that they feel are derelict, or
simply to convince others of the validity of a point of view. People do this orally
or in writing. Such citations are never neutral. In Auroville, when people repeat
selected texts, whether orally or in writing, for use in particular places or
circumstances, at issue is far more than the mere expression of the community’s
ethos. Citing allows individuals and groups to construct an authority using symbols
and ideas that many others around them construe as an absolute truth.

By way of example, in 2004 I was asked to do some writing and editing of a
document being prepared for Auroville’s Planning and Development Council
(APDC), the entity which oversees the community’s land use and urban progress. The purpose of the document was to take inventory of the current socio-economic reality in Kottakarai, one of the five villages situated within Auroville’s city plan. Kottakarai’s residents had been among the first Tamil people in the area to come forward and sell their lands at Auroville’s inception. Currently, part of their village stands on part of the area where Auroville hopes to construct its International Zone, the area identified by the Mother for housing a series of pavilions that express the essential qualities of each of the world’s countries. This area is but a stone’s throw from the “soul” of Auroville, Matrimandir. Aurovilians had been tossing about the question of how best to go about integrating Kottakarai into Auroville’s vision for many years. Some people had even proposed the untenable idea of relocating the village and its inhabitants. No realistic and appropriate solutions revealed themselves. On the part of some people involved in the city’s planning there had been a “bury-the-head-in-the-sand” attitude towards the matter, dramatically portrayed in the fact that Kottakarai did not even appear on standard maps of Auroville’s spiral shaped urban plan. Ironically, Kottakarai had received the least attention from any of Auroville’s active village development efforts over the years, for a host of reasons, among them the fact that its residents had not shown much interest, even though infrastructure, resources and education were sorely lacking. The question of how to approach the issue had become finally more urgent. Kottakarai had grown considerably in recent years due to an influx of migrants
taking advantage of employment opportunities in Auroville. At the same time, the International Zone projects had begun in earnest. In light of all this, the APDC requested Krishna, a long-time Tamil Aurovilian, to make a survey of the village’s current conditions and possible workable solutions. Krishna first examined the history of Kottakarai and its later extensions, creating new maps that depicted the village in exact relation to Auroville and existing water resources. He then interviewed both Aurovilians involved in such matters and the village’s residents about what they envisioned as future possibilities for development.

In reviewing the document and composing its introduction, what first struck me was the fact that consistently the oral interviews of Aurovilians referred to one or another statement by the Mother, even if in the most general or vague way. For example, one man stated that the Mother wanted Auroville to be a “melting pot of world cultures” and that this included the “ancient Tamil heritage.” For this reason priority should be given to integrating Kottakarai into the International Zone plan, perhaps even locating a museum or center for Tamil culture within its area. The Mother herself never used such exact wordings. Particularly strong was a the full page section allotted to two Aurovilians, who from the community’s beginning have been intensely involved in village education and in serving as liaisons between Auroville and its neighbors. Although the couple did not have anything to say specifically about Kottakarai, Krishna felt that they gave weight to the whole endeavor of addressing any village issue, as they had once been in direct contact.
with the Mother with regard to their own village work. Their oral testimony consisted primarily of anecdotes about these contacts, such as relating how the Mother had encouraged them, once even by sending sweets for them to distribute to villagers on a particular Ashram holiday.

The entire document itself, as Krishna had structured it, reflected this same impulse. Its first few pages featured the ubiquitous texts of the Mother’s Dream and Auroville’s Charter. Scrawled in large letters across one was a reprint of the Mother’s handwriting stating, “Blessings,” as she used to put on numerous documents, letters and proposals that were passed her way. There was also a page devoted to a quotation from Sri Aurobindo about the greatness of Tamil culture.

That these texts had such prominence in an internally circulating document, intended for Aurovilian readers who undoubtedly had read them in umpteen contexts, was for me a clear illustration of the fact that even the most concrete, and in some ways common sense assertions must gain legitimacy in the public sphere through direct association with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. These quotations were both reminders and proof of the spirit in which the document had been created. They also established the authority for the perspective conveyed. It was as if to say, “Mother would have agreed with this.” The fact that the Kottakarai issue, and village issues in general, are a source of debate in the community, made the appearance of the quotations all the more relevant, but at the same time ironic. Innumerable other positions related to these matters could seek their legitimacy in
the same. For example, I have often heard people opposed to giving too much weight to village development efforts citing the Dream and Charter to bolster their argument that the Mother wanted Aurovilians to dedicate themselves to founding the city of the future, and not to charitable efforts.

Thus, in aligning themselves with what they regard are positions of truth, people consciously or unconsciously deploy the means of creating or dismantling power. Citations are performative acts that seek to promote particular visions of the community’s development, or justify particular means for reaching what are only presumably common goals. One of the defining characteristics of performance is that it involves repetition. This links what takes place in the present with something that has come before, whether it be a series of ritual gestures, a play text, or something as abstract as a collection of ideas generally regarded as “natural.” It is this repeating that lends performance its two-fold potential, what Schechner calls the “restoration of behavior” (1985). In referencing what has come before, performances create continuity over time, allowing for the reproduction of social systems and cultural practices. At the same time, the fact that no enactment is ever identical to the “original,” or to any prior enactment, allows for social change. The relationship between citation and power has been the subject of exhaustive treatment by philosopher Judith Butler (1993), who argues that each repetition opens up a space for inadequacies, readjustments, and modifications. Ultimately this space occupies a destabilizing position with relation to accepted,
ruling orders, as flawed repetitions serve as reminders that what is taken as “natural” – in the case of Butler the division between male and female genders – is actually not natural at all, but actually something socially determined and therefore potentially malleable. Performance, thus, carries the capacity for subverting the order of things. In her analysis of sex and gender, she argues that naming something brings it into being, even as the utterance cloaks its constitutive power and disguises itself as an expressive declaration of something that exists apriori and independently.\(^6\) In Auroville, citations function precisely as Butler theorizes. Whether or not consciously intended by the speaker (something, of course, difficult to evaluate), they serve often to disguise any personal or egoistic claim to authority by identifying the speaker with the absolute and unquestioned authority of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Kireet Joshi’s anecdotes about his time with the Mother are a good case in point.

As I discovered myself, it is hard not to fall into the common pattern of legitimizing one’s own thoughts by citing theirs. For example, during my stint as a contributing editor of AV Today, I wrote an article for the August 2000 issue that commemorated both India’s independence and Sri Aurobindo’s birthday. In it I

\(^6\) Butler’s work builds upon Derrida’s (1977) critical re-reading of Austin (1975), the linguist who believed that utterances could be distinguished as expressive, or performative. In his analysis Austin excluded from consideration theatrical speech, which he saw as a mere parroting of previously established meanings and therefore, constituting a kind of false performative. In response, Derrida argues for the historicity of all utterances, claiming that all speech acts involve iterability, or repetition of conventions and meanings which serve to make what is being said appear natural, or matter-of-fact.
argued for the need to look at India with new eyes that eschew Orientalist tropes, both those that are idealistic and those that are scathingly negative. I argued that we need to see the country, its people, and cultures in their full complexity. Hyperaware of my audience, I boosted the validity of my view by citing Sri Aurobindo’s claim that everything within the realm of human possibility, for better or worse, could be found in India. What is more, I cited the idea without specifying any exact bibliographical reference. My failure to give an exact reference was not corrected by the magazine’s editors:

India has long been the object of the most confining clichés. Observers have prioritized some salient features of her culture over others, erasing from their view any diversity that might stand at odds with their perceptions. For example, many intellectuals, artists, and citizens have insisted on seeing India as eternal and unchanging, or at its core concerned with a kind of spiritual escapism. Some have condemned India in their thinking to a quagmire of inescapable poverty and injustice. Others have smothered her in a veil of exotic mystery. All such stereotypes serve only to deny the capability of Indian people to change over time. Moreover, in truth, India is many things, not merely a handful of essential cultural traits. As Sri Aurobindo pointed out, there is little in the range of human possibility that cannot be found on this soil (Pillai 2000: 1).

It is common practice to reference the Mother and Sri Aurobindo without exact citation, leaving open the question as to whether the stated proposition is accurate and properly contextualized, off the mark and/or second-hand hearsay. Certainly much of what is attributed to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is cited so many times that it has passed fully over into the public domain. I believed that such was the case with what I stated in my article. In retrospect, however, I was uncertain as to whether it was Sri Aurobindo or the Mother or both who made the
statement about India, and I was equally uncertain as to whether I actually ever read such a quotation in one of their works or simply picked it up. If it is possible to retain this shadow of a doubt in the context of one of the community’s primary and closely edited publications, then there is no question that people may be attributing all kinds of things to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the course of daily life without actually knowing the source of the quotation.

When people cite the Mother or Sri Aurobindo during a personal discussion or a public debate at a meeting, they rarely acknowledge the fact that they are interpreting the statement being quoted. Instead, the quotation is offered up as a self-evident truth, the essential meaning of which bears no relation to the context in which it is said. Yet context is everything. For example, at a meeting in 2001 about the housing scarcity, a European Aurovilian expressed sympathy with the fact that several Tamil residents were living in inadequate housing, by reminding everyone that the Mother once called the local Tamil people the “first Aurovilians.” The tone was conciliatory; the woman was politely pointing out what she regarded as an injustice at odds with the Mother’s intentions for human unity. It was, therefore, a matter worthy of attention. The same two words, “first Aurovilians,” had quite a different ring when in 2002 they were cited in a letter written in Auroville’s internal, weekly newsletter, *AV News*. The letter promoted the cause of a group of organized, assertive Tamil Aurovilians, alleging that the community was biased against local people becoming Aurovilians. The group’s leader was a long
time Auroville resident, whose wife had been consistently denied Aurovilian status over the years. According to the Entry Group, this was simply because she had outright stated that she had no particular interest in Auroville or the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The tone of the Tamil group’s correspondence was defiant, and some people found it even threatening, especially since it was one in a series of letters. Members of the group had assertively requested a meeting with the Entry Group and had insinuated — as one Entry Group member told me — that failure to support the group’s claims and demands would lead to legal action, although it was vague as to what grounds existed for such. A Tamil Aurovilian friend once mentioned to me that he thought that many other Aurovilians tended to get suspicious whenever Tamil Aurovilians met together to discuss anything related to the community. But the current episode was not just a racial issue. Many Tamil Aurovilians I knew were equally concerned. At risk was the possibility that members of the community could commandeer the entry process to suit their own ends, rather than to contribute to the collective good of realizing Auroville’s aims. Citing the “first Aurovilians” in the context of demanding that established policies — especially ones at the heart of official definitions of what it means to be an Aurovilian — be changed, is a very different move from gently asserting something as commonly believed as that all Aurovilians should have proper housing. That one comes from an organized group of Tamil men and the other from a white
Aurovilian woman is also significant. This instance is but one of many. Clearly, people can use the very same texts for multiple purposes depending on the context.

It is important to note that quoting from the Mother or Sri Aurobindo does not just serve the purpose of trying to get things done. It can form the basis of humor. People frequently make citations ironically, to highlight how the confused reality of daily life contradicts the ideal vision that some people may wish to uphold. For example, a friend who had grown up in Auroville once told me, while we were drinking beer at a party, about how many cross-generational sexual relationships he had observed over the years and how often he had been approached by older women. He laughed, citing one of the lines in the Mother’s charter for Auroville, “Hey, what the hell, everyone here has ‘a youth that never ages,’ right?”

Another use of citation not at the service of achieving a particular material aim s when the very act of quotation is intended by the speaker to be significant in and of itself. I witnessed a particularly humorous example of this once in 2001 during a heated meeting on the lack of housing, a contentious issue that earlier had led to the Entry Group’s decision to close Auroville to new arrivals for more than a year. At one point a young man raised his hand, stated he wanted to quote something “brief” and proceeded to read aloud from Mother’s Agenda for the next 10 or 15 minutes. The passage, as I remembered it and others recollected, did not directly relate to the discussion at hand. Moreover, in its length, it seemed to take away precious time needlessly for those who felt that the meeting should try to
accomplish concrete aims. While some Aurovilians waited patiently, others began to cough, snicker, and rattle their keys. Finally, one of the session moderators cut the man off.

Thus, quoting from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is ubiquitous in Auroville. It is an act that can assume innumerable forms to multiple and even conflicting ends. While it is something that seemed to annoy many Aurovilians with whom I spoke, it is a mode of communication that many people engage in on a regular basis.

*The Problem of Collective Interpretations: The Entry Group*

Thorny issues of interpreting the Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s writings come to the forefront at the collective level where Auroville formulates policies. Collectively, the community is dedicated to facilitate Auroville’s development in such a way that the place can one day fully enact the Mother’s intentions, which are stated in the Dream and the Charter and which are, of course, a product of the entire philosophical system that she and Sri Aurobindo developed. Staging the scripted ideals involves a long-term process of rehearsal, in which Aurovilians test out different approaches in a spirit of experimentation. Over the years, a series of organizational structures charged with executing community-wide policies have been established and dismantled. For example, with respect to urban planning, in 1991 a Development and Planning Coordination Group was formed to prepare a
draft of Auroville’s developmental priorities. In 1992, another Development Group was established specifically to make recommendations regarding the location and density of construction. By 1998, responsibilities were split between a Development Group, which granted building permission, and a Planning Group, which issued development guidelines. When people perceived that this was not a productive way of functioning, the whole thing was dismantled. A partial resolution was found in the creation of an Interim Planning and Development Council. Finally, in 2003, a larger, more formal set-up was established with the Auroville Planning and Development Council (APDC). The APDC reflects a wide range of viewpoints and involves people working in many capacities in the community. In addition to the possible tumultuous life of structures of authority, various ad-hoc groups arise from time to time to brainstorm particular issues. For example, in August 2004 I attended a meeting whose objective was to brainstorm how to centrally coordinate various village development efforts.

Of particular interest in the context of interpreting and performing the script that guides Auroville’s development is how the Entry Group engages with the Mother’s directions for becoming an Aurovilian. This important task stands at the heart of the issue of what it means to be an Aurovilian, who is capable of judging who is worthy, and by what criteria. An official authoritative body, the Entry Group evaluates applications to Auroville, monitoring applicants through their two-year trial period as Newcomers, and finally approving or rejecting new residents.
At the beginning of Auroville, the Mother herself reviewed and accepted applications for Auroville. After her death, the Sri Aurobindo Society took up the task. When conflict broke out between Auroville and the Society, entry proceeded on an ad hoc basis until in the early 1980s when an informal committee formed with the purpose of evaluating and accepting people. As one early member of the group told me, while there were guidelines, the process was loose compared to the present. Primarily committee informally evaluated what someone said about wanting to come to Auroville in light of the Mother’s text, “To Be a True Aurovilian.” Composed by her in June 1970, the text is idealistic and very general. It is hard to imagine evaluating a person in light of such statements:

- The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial, and hereditary appearances [...]
- One lives in Auroville in order to be free from moral and social conventions, but this freedom must not be a new slavery to the ego, to its desires, and ambitions [...]
- The Aurovilian should lose the sense of personal possession [...]
- Over time as more joined Auroville the Entry Group took on more formal dimensions. Still members were not elected to serve, but volunteered or were recruited by other Group members. As of 2003, the Auroville Council, comprised of elected members, is involved in proposing members for the Entry Group, whose candidature must be ratified by the Residents’ Assembly in order to serve. There is no set number that serves in the Group, but at any given time there are from 8-13 people, who serve an extendable term of three years. It is not a task that most
Aurovilians are keen on doing. The work is tedious and involves considerable responsibility.

Much of the formalizing of the entry process came about in 2003 when a series of Auroville-wide "seminars" took place to give residents the opportunity to discuss all aspects of the process. This series of meetings constituted a sort of rebirth in the community, as the Entry Group had been all but defunct for about 2 years, due to lack of members and Auroville’s acute housing shortage that made finding adequate accommodation for new residents exceedingly difficult. As a result of the seminar, the Entry Group and Auroville Council drafted a document entitled, the “Entry Mandate” that details the criteria for becoming an Aurovilian as well as for being an Entry Group member. The Mandate also specifies the Newcomer process, and creates channels for contesting the process. Auroville’s Residents’ Assembly, composed of all members of the community eighteen years or older, later ratified the draft, thereby making it an official document that circulates publicly on Auroville’s website.

The Entry Group’s task consists in evaluating what people say about the reasons for which they wish to join Auroville, observing their actual behavior, and then calibrating all this information against ongoing interpretations of the Mother’s statements about what living in Auroville is meant to be. The process begins when the potential applicant details her motivations before the Group, either in person or on email from her home country, after having spent a period of at least three
months in Auroville as a guest. Based on this information, the Entry Group grants
the individual an “entry letter,” which allows her to seek the volunteer worker
status visa from the Indian consulate in her home country. Of course, if the
applicant is Indian, this step does not apply, although the Group still makes an
initial appraisal as to whether the person is ready to apply to become an Aurovilian.
There are many examples of, say, women from the local villages who marry Tamil
Aurovilian men, but who do not exhibit sufficient visible interest in Auroville or its
philosophy to warrant admission into the entry process. Once the applicant arrives
in Auroville, the Entry Group continues to appraise her motivations and interests
and generally keeps track of how she is faring in the new life. As and when needed
the Group may request a meeting with the applicant to discuss her adjustment.
According to both Group members and Newcomers I spoke with, such interviews
are conducted in the most informal of manners at the Entry Group office. Lasting
anywhere from 10 minutes to over an hour, they usually take place in a friendly
atmosphere that puts applicants at ease. The questions are not scripted, and are
usually very general, unless there are specific concerns.

Aurovilians with whom the applicant interacts provide additional important
information about her progress. Each applicant is assigned a “contact person” who
volunteers her time to helping and guiding the Newcomer in any way needed, as
well as to providing feedback about the applicant to the Group. The Group seeks
feedback about the applicant from other Aurovilians as well, usually the person’s
neighbors or work supervisor. A high level of privacy is maintained. All information, whether provided by the applicant or in the form of feedback from others, is available only to Entry Group members. Usually such observations are routine, but I have heard Newcomers express discomfort at the thought that others could evaluate their public behavior.

The whole process, which in most cases is smooth, takes two years. At the end of this Newcomer trial period, all members of the Group meet and must unanimously endorse the applicant. If endorsed, the Group announces the applicant in *AV News*. Other members of the community have two weeks in which to voice any negative feedback for the Group to take into consideration in making its final decision. Most of the time the person then becomes Aurovilian, and is added to the official “Master List” maintained by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation.

Occasionally, the Group denies Aurovilian status. As per the community’s new official guidelines, there is a formal process of appeal to the Auroville Council, who investigates the situation and makes recommendations to the Entry Group. Thus far the Council has overruled the Entry Group in only a couple of cases. Formal processes aside, the informal pressure brought to bear upon the Entry Group when it denies a person Aurovilian status can be quite substantial. The applicant’s Aurovilian friends and supporters usually spearhead this pressure. It can become a vicious public affair as in when people publish diatribes either in the *AV News* (something no longer possible as of 2003 rules for the newsletter), or
in internet postings to a website available to all Aurovilians and Auroville’s friends abroad. Attacks can be personal, targeting specific people and accusing them of everything from incompetence to racism. In such a small community, where one cannot hide, being on the receiving end of such words can be very unpleasant. As one friend observed, working in the Entry Group requires a thick skin.

It is inevitable that the Entry Group will inspire conflict. Evaluating candidates for anything is a task that comes under fire anywhere. In Auroville, however there is the added complexity that the criteria are not all established by Aurovilians, but by a spiritual authority. The towering nature of the ideals make it difficult work to evaluate any human being. Then there is the issue of who can call themselves qualified to judge others in this light. A closer look at some of the criteria, and how they have changed over time, provides a window into the conflicts that arise in the course of endeavoring to formulate collective interpretations. Many of the expectations as the Mother stated them are detailed in the small brochure, “Joining Auroville” (AV n.d.). The 2003 Mandate refers to some of these, but also spells them out in relation to other specifics authored by Aurovilians (AV Entry Group 2004).

Some of what the Group must evaluate is pretty cut and dry, whereas other things are vague. To begin with, as the Mandate and the brochure make clear, one has to follow the laws of India. By extension, this means that, “Drugs are
forbidden in Auroville,” something that the brochure and Mandate explicitly stipulate.

On the other hand, other statements, seemingly obvious, actually open up a range of questions. By way of one example, the brochure quotes the Mother as saying, “Each member of the community should have an activity that corresponds to the needs of Auroville.” In the Mandate the same idea is worded a bit differently, but also with reference to a quotation. Under the list of criteria to become a Newcomer, it is stated that a person should be: “willing to further the manifestation of those ideals according to his/her capacity.” Next to this appearing in italicized script is the quotation “‘everyone will have to contribute to the collective welfare through his work, in kind or with money.’” The same idea is detailed more later in the same section of the document in the following way: “Newcomers are normally expected to contribute to Auroville by taking up regular work that is meaningful to the growth and realization of Auroville.” This imperative stems from the heavy emphasis that both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo placed work. The entry policy statements, as well as the Mother’s own comments, make it clear that manifesting the ideals of Auroville is synonymous with work. However, what might constitute “collective welfare” and what work is “meaningful” to Auroville’s growth could be subject to a very wide range of interpretations.
For example, a man once mentioned to me that he believed it possible that someone meditating several hours a day could actually do much towards furthering Auroville’s growth. When I mentioned this to other people, many found the notion egotistic and foolish, asserting instead that a person should be engaged in work that actualizes Auroville’s goals in more concretely obvious ways. But this is also a hard call, as different people would have highly different things to say about what Auroville’s concrete needs are. Does the community need a place for teenagers to hang out? Do Aurovilians need to help build infrastructure in bordering villages to promote good relations? Does Auroville need another manufacturing unit making clothing for export, thereby helping the community to become more self-sustaining? Does Auroville need a university at this present stage? Does Auroville’s cultural life profit from an artist who creates works that are rarely exhibited or purchased? These are but a few of the innumerable questions I heard debated on a daily basis. Of course, these needs are not mutually exclusive. It is quite possible that Auroville needs all of these activities.

Once a need is defined as worthy, there is still the question as to how one can contribute to meeting it. For example, I heard that an Aurovilian had created a task in Matrimandir Gardens of gathering fallen flowers, creating a mandala out of them and then composting them. She hoped in this way to make a compost with “special vibrations” as per the Mother’s statements about the consciousness and qualities of particular plants. Prakash, an Entry Group member I spoke with at
length in 2003 and 2004, told me that although an Aurovilian was actively engaged in this pursuit, it was not considered work in the community from the standpoint of the Group and, therefore, not permissible for Newcomers.

I asked Prakash at length about how he and his colleagues determined whether an applicant’s work was making a worthwhile contribution to the community. I mentioned the meditation example to him, and he replied that that would not be acceptable in his view based on the fact that Sri Aurobindo said that sitting in a cave and contemplating God did not lead to the kind of spiritual accomplishment that living in the world and engaging in tangible activities in it could do. A Newcomer who proposed to meditate for her work would be asked to take up some other kind of work. Another former Group member, Molly, told me that she would not have been in favor of the meditation on the simple grounds that it was not possible for most people to evaluate what exactly such an activity was bringing about in the world.

Unlike the meditator, there are many people who propose to do things that the Group sees as in sync with Auroville’s goals. These activities, however, might not meet present needs. Prakash cited the example of massage, saying that as a community that attracts New Age oriented people, several Newcomers arrive professing to be masseurs in their home countries. Such work is in and of itself acceptable in the eyes of the community. According to him, “Massage is not something the Mother talked about specifically, but it fits in. It helps someone to
do their other work and it facilitates physical processes and healing.” The problem is not a philosophical one, but a matter of current needs. Auroville has a glut of masseurs and alternative healers. As a result, the Entry Group has been asking such candidates to find some other way to be of service if they wish to join the community.

In addition to the difficulty the Entry Group has with determining what Auroville needs from applicants, there is the problem of how the Group interprets statements from the Mother that, while obvious on the surface, are difficult to impose because there are many current Aurovilians who do not conform to them. For example, the Joining Auroville brochure quotes the Mother as saying that “Everyone should work at least five hours every day including Sundays.” I asked Milton, an Entry Group member, what the Group says when Newcomers complain about being held to standards that some Aurovilians violate. He answered flatly, “We just say that that is the requirement.” From the point of view of the Group, some people can be quite unreasonable in terms of what they expect to pass as “work.” For example, I about Newcomers who felt it reasonable that their five hours could include the time they spent reading Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, or studying a martial art. When I mentioned this to an Aurovilian friend, she felt the idea that reading is work was outrageous: “We’re not talking about subtle interpretations of the Mother here, or difficult definitions of what the community needs from people.” It seems clear that while Integral Yoga is about achieving
progress for the whole by developing individuals, in Auroville great emphasis is placed upon work from which many others also directly benefit in immediate ways.

Finally, there are mandates that the Mother herself articulated that probably few members of the Entry Group would feel qualified to evaluate in anyone. It is perhaps for this reason that the new “Entry Mandate” document does not make reference to such, although the brochure does. Most significant is the Mother’s statement, “But to live in Auroville one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.” The sense I got from the Entry Group is that they do not discuss these statements extensively. As Prakash said, “Sometimes a Newcomer brings up a question of that nature. They might ask, “In what way should one ‘surrender’?” We say, “Look at Auroville, look what the Mother said was for Auroville, look at what you are doing.” This would seem to be the most general of terms for discussing hugely complicated philosophical ideals. When I asked this same person, who had also served on the Group at its inception during the early 1980s, if this had always been the approach to the entry process, he replied:

The criteria now take the practical reality into consideration much more. Auroville is in a very physical state now, in terms of its development and growth. It’s being built. The change is also because there is no guide, like the Mother. So, the philosophical aspects are given importance, but not as much as the practical realities (2004).

Taking the Mother’s edicts to heart in the entry process would seem to have been more a thing of the early idealism that characterized Auroville. Now, with the emphasis on development, the mood has changed. Moreover, as another former
Group member told me, there is greater sense from past experience of just how difficult it can be to apply the Mother's more monumental statements. Perhaps that is why the new Mandate omits such direct quotations, glossing over them by stating that one should be, “inspired by and committed to the Charter and the ideals of Auroville.” It also explains why the criteria make it equally important that an applicant find suitable housing without expectation of help from the community, and also that she demonstrate how she will sustain herself and not “become a financial burden for the community at some future date.”

Measuring up applicants in relation to any of the criteria, whether simple mandates or almost impossible ideals, involves a process of prediction. The Entry Group concerns itself with whether the people that it makes Aurovilian actually continue to live up to what is expected of them long after the Newcomer trial period is over. In other words, they are preoccupied with attempting to discern people’s true intentions. But how to really know whether someone is sincere or merely giving lip service to the ideals? Most Group members seem to agree that experience facilitates the ability to discriminate among applicants. Shared cultural orientation is also a great help. Molly, who is European, told me that with European applicants she felt that she had a better “feeling” for the person, as she understood something of the background from which they came and the subtleties of the language they used to express themselves. With local Tamil applicants, however, she felt at a loss as to whether what was being expressed by the person
was “clear and sincere” or not. For this reason, the Entry Group has always sought to involve Tamil Aurovilians in the entry process. In addition, a strong emphasis is placed upon intuition. Prakash told me, “Sometimes you just know something is not right, so then you ask more questions.” He cited the example of a Russian applicant who had stated that he wanted to found a new settlement in Auroville, where he and three other women would together share a house and “do everything together.” Group members concurred that the situation sounded a bit like a harem, and so inquired further with the man in person and concluded that this had been the true purpose behind the idea and applicant’s main motivation for joining Auroville. Thus, members rely not only on objective criteria and information, but also on feelings they receive from the person’s tone, “vibrations,” and eye contact during interviews. As anywhere, members are sometimes reluctant to discuss their “feelings” about an applicant, for fear that they might lead to wrong conclusions. As a result, they have made efforts to try to take intuition more seriously, especially since Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have indicated that such mental capacities belong to the higher levels of the mind. For example, in 2003 a man came from Sweden and conducted a workshop for the Group with the objective of providing exercises for cultivating intuitive skills.

The task, nonetheless, remains difficult. There is no member of the Group I have ever spoken with who claimed that the process was perfect. It was more a question of people coming together in the spirit of service and doing the best that
they could. As Prakash said, “Our current system is about managing the growing numbers of applicants and trouble shooting. It’s not about progressing to something that is better.”

In the end, collectively interpreting the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is an inevitably imperfect process. Although the Entry Group provides a particularly vivid example, muddling through the application of specific philosophical principles in the light of current, physical realities is the central dynamic behind the ongoing performance of Auroville. The community must create formal structures to get the job done, even though this stands at odds with the ultimate aim of governance through divine anarchy. Then, no matter how carefully processes are tailored and executed, it becomes impossible to please everyone, as there are so many differing points of view. While it is easy to attack people on purely philosophical grounds, when it actually comes to finding solutions for enacting specific principles in particular situations that affect the community as a whole, most people agree that things are not as easy as they seem. As a long-time Indian Aurovilian friend, Sukanya, succinctly summarized in 2002, “The fact is that the teachings are up here [indicated with her hand above her head] but we are all down here. But they make us aspire to be more than we are. That’s what makes life here so interesting.”
Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of Auroville is the centrality of the texts of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. These writings constitute the script for realizing the community’s goals. This does not mean to say, however, that all people regard these writings in the same way. On the contrary, people approach the essential texts in a multiplicity of ways. One of the conflicts is whether to regard the Mother and Sri Aurobindo as a closed canon for Auroville. Similarly, residents disagree about whether these writings represent an everlasting and unchanging truth, or rather a significant step in an evolutionary process.

While reading and interpreting shape people’s private lives in important ways, the more significant moments occur in public where texts become the basis for consolidating and contesting power. Whether to affirm the knowledge of a textual authority or to promote particular points of view about Auroville’s development, expounding upon and citing texts are an important means for performing common and contested values and visions. So ubiquitous is the continual reference to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, that it is almost an unspoken rule that a point of view on any topic holds validity only through association with quotations and excerpts from these towering figures. Of course, debate arises since people can put the same text at the service of varying tangible ends.

All of the problems of textual interpretation come to the forefront when it comes to the collective performances that formulate and execute policies. Formal
structures deal with the enactment of the vision of the community’s founders, although these organizational processes come under attack. The monumental nature of Auroville’s goals, coupled with the complexity of measuring ideals against physical realities, guarantee that any structures can only be experiments in Auroville’s rehearsal process.

Aurovilians do not see the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the same ways. While they see essential differences in the expression and nature of the truth each author reveals, they also perceive that any specific text possesses unique qualities. Particular texts are important for varying reasons. They have different social histories and roles to play in the community’s life. Moreover, they inspire different responses from readers. In this chapter I have outlined the general context in which the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo inform performance in Auroville. In the following, I focus on the social lives of two texts in particular, Mother’s Agenda and Sri Aurobindo’s poem, Savitri, both of which play an especially important role in daily life.
CHAPTER 4

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MOTHER'S AGENDA AND SAVITRI

As argued in the previous chapter, it is through processes of reading, interpreting and performing that Aurovilians create a sense of common aspiration and camaraderie, even as the very same processes establish a variety of positions from which people experience social bonds and perspectives about the community’s development. To demonstrate the variety of performative responses a given text can inspire I have elected to focus here on two of what I consider to be among the most significant texts circulating in Auroville: Mother’s Agenda and Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, Savitri. Both belong to the official canon of Auroville, in as much as they are commonly read and are cited in numerous brochures and publications. Despite this – or maybe because of it – people interpret these texts all kinds of ways.

Both the Agenda and Savitri play an important role in Auroville’s daily life. They exemplify the ways in which some of the texts that comprise the script for realizing Auroville have important stories behind them. Such stories get woven into the fabric of textual content such that people and events from the past become inseparable in the minds of some people who approach writings in the present. In this way, the Agenda in particular forms the basis for social identities based upon
specific philosophical standpoints, as well as particular versions of collective memory. Finally, but not least, it is in reading these writings that Aurovilians compose what Clifford Geertz so famously noted as “a story they tell themselves about themselves.” Savitri in particular opens up the possibility for ritual and theater that Aurovilians believe link them with greater forces. These performances also provide them with the concrete experience of being a part of a collective. The unique nature of each work and the specific powers and/or insight ascribed to it demand different things of readers and inspire them to varied ends in the ongoing performance of a utopian vision. Consequently, I will treat each separately as I examine the historical processes and performance conventions that shape its role.

Mother's Agenda (1978 – French, 1981 – English)

This monumental text is a transcription of conversations with the Mother about her spiritual experiences, in particular the details of her ongoing, systematic investigations into the nature of consciousness as it lives in the cells of the human body. Its importance for all aspects of life in Auroville cannot be understated. The Agenda is one of the few documents in which the Mother specifically outlined her vision for the community. Thus, it is one of the core texts at the basis of the script.

\[1\] This frequently referenced quotation hails from Geertz’s discussion about the cockfight in Bali (1973: 448) and forms the basis for many scholarly discussions on the role of performance.
for realizing Auroville. Quotations from the Agenda appear throughout Auroville’s publications and public displays. For example, daily a quotation is selected for display on the chalkboard at the Solar Kitchen. The Mother’s words from this text are reminders of the community’s aims. Their citation is a performative effort to bring about what the words say.

Yet for a text considered by some readers to be as important and sacred as the Vedas, the life and times of the Agenda have been rocky. It was once the focal point for conflict between philosophical factions, in part because of suspicions surrounding its enigmatic author, Satprem. The history of the Agenda that unfolded during the early years, a story that I relate below, is shrouded in intrigue to this day. The memory of that time, as it lives in the minds of some long-time Aurovilians, stands as a reminder that philosophical rivalries are far more than mere polite disagreements over the nuances of spiritual practice. They galvanize fierce emotion that can rock the very foundation on which the community stands. The case of the Agenda clearly demonstrates that events that surround the circulation and reading of a text come to constitute a part of that text’s significance in the minds of its interpretive community. The Agenda’s importance lies not only in the relevance of its content for manifesting Auroville, but also for the role it plays in the collective memory of a pivotal time in the community’s history.
The Past Life of the Agenda

The figure behind the Agenda is a French man known as Satprem (born 1923). Satprem, originally Bernard Enginger, came to live at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in 1953. He developed a particularly close relationship with the Mother and the two spent long periods of time conversing one-on-one. It was the Mother who gave him the name, “Satprem,” which means “the true love” in Sanskrit, in 1957. Throughout the 1950s and up until her death in 1972, Satprem became a scribe for the Mother’s observations and commentary, dutifully recording their conversations in French. He eventually published them in 1978 as a body of work consisting of 13 volumes, which he called, L’Agende de Mere. Up to today the Agenda has been only partially translated into English.

While long stretches of the transcription entail the Mother speaking about a range of topics, other sections are in a much more conversational mode. To give an example, in this passage from April 28, 1971, Satprem expresses his discomfort at the way some Aurovilians receive him:

SATPREM: I get a lot of requests from all sorts of people, either to say something or do something or comment on something or... I feel it’s not so good.

MOTHER: What do they ask you?

SATPREM: One thing or another, a commentary, an explanation, “What do I think of...?”

MOTHER: But does it come from Auroville?
SATPREM: Most of it, yes.

MOTHER: Listen, there’s quite a lazy group in Auroville!

SATPREM: Oh, that, yes!

MOTHER: People who don’t want to work. Now they say that according to your book, to get the true consciousness, one doesn’t have to work!

SATPREM: Yes, that’s it. I heard that also. They say, ‘Work belongs to the old world.’

MOTHER: Yes, that’s how they understand it. So, what can you do? What did you reply to them?

SATPREM: I spoke to [the architect]. I told him what I thought. I said that work is the foundation (AV Press n.d.: 219-220).

Considering the length of the material, it is noteworthy that the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, which publishes all the original writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, did not publish the Agenda. In fact, the Agenda does not appear in the Ashram library or bookstore and is not in the curriculum of the Ashram School. Basically the controversy surrounding Satprem is at the source. At the heart of the issue was disagreement over the ownership of the taped recordings of Satprem’s conversations with the Mother. From what I could piece together from various oral sources representing different points of view, Ashram officials maintained that the tapes were Ashram property, along with all other writings and recordings of either the Mother or Sri Aurobindo. Satprem, however, disagreed. Some people said that Satprem was given the tapes from the Mother’s
room by Champaklal, the Mother’s attendant and close disciple. Others asserted that he himself took them. At any rate, Satprem arranged for them to be carried to France, where they were later published in the original French by Satprem supporters operating under the auspices of a newly founded institution known as l’Institut de Recherches Evolutives (Institute for Evolutionary Research). Not surprisingly, the Ashram did not take kindly to this and insisted that Satprem hand over the material.

Satprem and some of his supporters asserted that the Ashram pressure was great. What occurred after that is shrouded in mystery, as there are several versions of the story. In one version of the story, during one night somewhere in the late 1970s Ashramites or Ashram appointed individuals broke into his residence and physically attacked him. Another version locates Satprem sitting in a canyon near Auroville when some hired, local thugs pass by and threaten him, a menace he purportedly evaded by calling upon the power of a mantra. In still other versions, all of the above is a fiction of Satprem and his supporters. At any rate, Satprem fled into hiding. His supporters, among them many Aurovilians, built him a new house in secret in Kottagiri, near the former hill station of Ooty, Tamil Nadu. There he took up residence clandestinely, maintaining close contact with his supporters, in particular, a group of French Aurovilians.
It was shortly after this time, that all of the materials related to the publication of the *Agenda* (with the exception of the actual taped recordings themselves), which had been housed in Auroville, “disappeared.” Prior to this time, Auroville had been designated as the primary distribution center for the materials. Allegedly, they were loaded onto a truck and taken away in the middle of the night by some of those closest to Satprem.

Whatever the truth of these stories, Satprem is a controversial figure who provokes strong emotional reactions. While some Aurovilians and Ashramites promote the view that Satprem was mentally unstable, power hungry, and/or sought to somehow profit from his privileged access to the Mother, others contend that certain people high up in the Ashram hierarchy wrongly sidelined him out of envy. Details about any side of the issue are hard to obtain as many people are reluctant to discuss the subject. Therefore, unfounded rumors abound. For example, people have told me that Satprem was apprehended once on the stair to the Mother’s room with a knife, presumably set on harming her in some way. For this reason, as well as other incidents, Satprem was not allowed to see the Mother during the critical period before her death. Other people, on the other hand, assert that some Ashramites cooked up the knife story out of pure envy. I have also heard people claim that because Satprem was not allowed to see the Mother at the time of her death, he was unable to make sure that the instructions she herself had given for the
care of her body were followed. The story goes that the Mother had indicated that it might only look as if she were dead, and that actually she would return in a more supramentalized state. Because her body was immediately declared dead and interred, this possibility was closed. Of course, many people doubt this account of events.

At the same time, Satprem commands tremendous respect, particularly from some French Aurovilians. He is the author of several books about not only the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but also his own spiritual experiences. Although Satprem’s writings have been translated into many languages, including Indian languages, French speakers claim that the original French is particularly beautiful and moving. It was Satprem who introduced many French speakers to Integral Yoga. For them he was both an inspiration and someone with whom they could identify. In the words of one reader:

MICHELLE: [When I came to Auroville] I had not read so much. Most of what I had read were Satprem’s books and in particular was extremely touched by On the Way to Supermanhood. I don’t know what it gives when one reads it in English, but in French it is extremely beautiful and striking. And Mother told him at that time, it’s in the Agenda - some talks in, I think, ’72 - he reads a passage to Mother and she is in another world and she says, ‘It’s magnificent.’ She says, ‘It’s the language of the new consciousness.’ So when it is like that, I don’t know if you can translate those things. But they are experiences that he makes living for you. You hardly understand those experiences but you feel immediately that this is true. You feel like, ‘Yes! Yes!’ Because he employs a poetic language that makes you see or feel how must be that experience (2001).
Given the power of his words, it is hardly surprising that in the early years of Auroville several Aurovilians maintained close contact with Satprem, who continued to live in nearby Pondicherry, rather than Auroville itself. From their point of view, Satprem was a wise and compassionate guide.

Although only some people have revered him, there is a widespread recognition of the importance of Satprem’s creation of the Agenda, as the documented conversations contain information pertinent specifically to Auroville on every possible topic from education, to the use of drugs, to what kind of food might one day be served there. The Mother frequently kept Satprem up to date on her plans for her city and on her ongoing correspondence and dialogues with related parties. As such, the Agenda is an important document of the historical development of the Mother’s vision, as well as a record of what her intentions for it were. Moreover, many Aurovilians believed that the Agenda, with its emphasis on research and processes of radical transformation, somehow embodied the true spirit behind the creation of Auroville. According to some people I spoke with who lived through those times, there were Aurovilians who viewed the Agenda as an embodiment of the Mother’s own divine force. For all these reasons, the Agenda was something that belonged to and could guide the community.

The text is not without its critics, however. Some people, in both Auroville and more commonly in the Ashram claimed that Satprem did more than merely
transcribe the conversations with the Mother. They believed he embellished and edited sections, adding commentary with inflammatory statements about other Ashramites in the footnotes. Whether Satprem indeed took liberty with transcription has never proven, however. To this day he has never allowed anyone access to the original recordings.

The strange occurrences surrounding Satprem and the *Agenda* echoed the general chaos in Auroville during the mid and late 1970s. It was around the same moment that tensions erupted in 1975 as part of Auroville’s conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS). The SAS was a cultural and educational association based in Pondicherry directed by the Mother, who had entrusted it with legal requirements for Auroville. When the Mother passed away, the SAS leaders moved quickly onto the scene in an attempt to wield exclusive control over the management, assets and policy of Auroville. A bitter dispute ensued between the SAS and Auroville’s residents, continuing in some form or another into the 1980s.

During this period rival factions in the community were pitted against one another and against the SAS. Their fighting underscored fundamental differences in approaches to the community’s philosophy. The older, more conservative SAS members, under leadership of long-time Ashram devotee Navajata, had a doctrinal

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2 Details about the SAS conflict drawn from the compilations of early writings by various Aurovilian authors in Sullivan 1994, Butler 2001 and several conversations with Aurovilians.
view of things, more on the order of the disciplined atmosphere of the Ashram. They also had a pie-in-the-sky vision for Auroville, which did not fit with on-the-ground realities. This was in part because most of the SAS leaders never actually took up regular residence in Auroville, preferring to control things from Pondicherry. Aurovilians, however, were young and rebellious. Many fought for the right to creatively interpret the Mother’s instructions on their own, as they contended was the true, anarchic spirit of the project. They also were committed to the Mother’s idea that only those who lived in Auroville could run the place.

It was hardly a polite disagreement. The SAS mismanagement included pilfering the international funds that came for Auroville’s development. So little of this money reached the community that the years 74 and 75 were extremely lean, with food shortages a serious problem for all residents. Many of the people I know who lived through those years described that time as one of hunger. The SAS also used government connections to try to revoke visas of Aurovilians. On top of this, the SAS used rather ruthless methods of control, installing watchmen and thugs in and around the work site of Matrimandir. Altercations between Aurovilians and the SAS “bosses” sometimes turned violent. One episode in August 1977 was particularly virulent and the police intervened, arresting several Aurovilians.

There was a sense that the utopian vision was about to crash and burn. With the Mother gone, could the New World really be born? For many Aurovilians
the moment seemed apocalyptic. It is noteworthy how written descriptions of the
period paint the conflict in epic terms:

Without considering the psychological and economic motivations that may
have determined this conflict, perhaps we may consider the situation
symbolic of a type of inertia that is predominant in our age and society,
something in human nature and society that has to change everywhere,
particularly where a concerted effort and pressure to evolve are being
deliberately applied, as they are in Auroville and where the process of
purification, common to any yogic endeavor, is taking place on a collective
scale (Rod as quoted in Sullivan 1994: 196).

Until a Supreme Court decision was handed down in 1980, placing
Auroville under the purview of the Indian Government, it seemed to some people
that there was no way out of the serious circumstances. Even outside observers
took Auroville as doomed. As Butler points out in his discussion of collective
memory, however, the era was characterized by two sentiments. On the one hand,
there was a “loss of innocence.” On the other, many Aurovilians felt a greater
sense of camaraderie and collective spirit than they had prior to confronting the
“enemy.”

Throughout this era, the Agenda became for some people not only a text,
but more importantly a symbol of the clash between doctrinal and creative
interpretations of Integral Yoga. Satprem himself promoted this view. In a letter to
Aurovilians in 1976 he said that the “battle” in Auroville and that over the Agenda
were “two aspects of a single question” (as quoted in Sullivan 1994: 209). Later in
an interview in 1981, he stated:

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And the ashram...meant, well, people entrenched in the truth. They were the “owners” – they owned Mother and Sri Aurobindo. They were the heirs; [...] So, naturally, the static forces, those that didn’t want to budge – who were entrenched in the truth – immediately tried to claim ownership over BOTH Mother’s Agenda AND Auroville (200).

It was because of the fear of SAS encroachment that the Agenda “disappeared.” In the view of Satprem and his supporters, the same impulse and kind of people behind the commandeering of Auroville were also at the fore of those who wished to see the Ashram gain control over the Agenda. Dogmatics wanted to shape Auroville to their liking, and dogmatics wished to censor the Agenda into conformity with established doctrine.

Seeing the bitter antagonism over the Agenda in tandem with the tumult of the SAS conflict, some 15 or 20 odd Aurovilians left the community in the late 70s and early 80s for their home countries, most of them to France. The political and philosophical conflicts proved too tough to sustain the idealism that had led them to Auroville in the first place. For many Aurovilians who remained, seeing friends’ disillusionment was a sad reminder of the present, limited consciousness of human beings. Building a new world was going to involve not just aspiration and inspiration, but conflict and pain.
Today’s Agenda

The controversies and anguish of those times continue to haunt the community even today. Firstly, there is the legacy of Satprem, now enshrouded in intrigue. He has not appeared in Auroville or Pondicherry since his departure and many Aurovilians I spoke with said they had no knowledge of his whereabouts. His official bio-data, as written in the blurb at the beginning of the English edition of the Adventure of Consciousness, indicates that in 1982, Satprem “withdrew completely to embark on the last adventure: the search for the “great passage” in the evolution beyond Man.” The port of call for this adventure was not entirely clear to me, however. One version I was told suggested that Satprem still lived in the house built for him near Ooty. Other reports indicated that he lived somewhere in the United States, or alternatively in the town of Mysore in Karnataka state, which is also the home of the Mira Aditi Centre, an organization that distributes both Mother’s Agenda and many of Satprem’s books in many languages in India. Still other stories suggested that Satprem traveled between these and other locations. One Aurovilian, who knew Satprem well once long ago, told me that Satprem did not wish his whereabouts to be known as he had become so “sensitive” to positive and negative vibrations of any sort, that even someone mailing him a letter at the post office could affect him.
Many people indicated to me that they were certain that some people in Auroville to this day have some sort of contact with Satprem. Finding out anything about these relationships, however, proved to be very difficult. I could not penetrate the atmosphere of secrecy and mystery surrounding Satprem. People simply did not want to talk about it. When I asked point blank, I was stone-walled. For example, while speaking to a young French Aurovilian at her house, I noticed that she kept a small photograph of Satprem on a table. When I asked her directly if she had ever met him, she rebuffed me with, “I do not talk about Satprem with people.” On another occasion, a friend who grew up in Auroville mentioned that his sister was an ardent “devotee” of Satprem. When I inquired as to whether he thought she would speak with me about it, he replied, “She doesn’t even talk about it with us [her other family members].” Thus, while many Aurovilians read Satprem’s writings, publicly displaying any reverence for him is considered questionable by a big proportion of Aurovilians. Attributing a special spiritual authority to Satprem is the basis for an alternative approach to the philosophical foundations of Auroville, in as much as officially Auroville promotes the Mother and Sri Aurobindo exclusively.

As for the legacy of the book itself, the tumultuous events of the *Agenda* and the SAS continues to wound residents who lived through those bitter days. The events of the conflicts find their way into all kinds of conversations, the collective
memory of that time serving as a common point of reference from which many Aurovilians formulate their unique sense of place and identity. As argued by Toby Butler in his analysis of history and memory in Auroville, the ongoing analysis of such critical periods in the past is an important tool through which Aurovilians shape their present and direct themselves towards the future they are hoping to manifest (2002).

Some Aurovilians feel that now is the time to heal the wounds that occurred during those times. These people see such a healing as a necessary step in moving the community forward. As a long-time resident who has held numerous leadership roles in the community, told me:

PETER: Asking me now in 2000, ‘What do you think about the Agenda?’ I think we can lay all that [the past] at rest. What happened, happened. We need to give up these old fights and work together. I remember once Satprem called us and said, ‘Mother has left behind two treasures. One is the Agenda and the other is Auroville. You have to look after Auroville and I have to look after the Agenda.’ I think it’s like when two rivers parted and I think the time has come now to join them again. The Agenda could well be a manual for living in Auroville. I think it is an incredible document. It’s like another Veda, a book of knowledge (2000).

How such reconciliation would proceed is not clear. What is certain is that the Agenda is more than a spiritual guidebook. It is a symbol both of despair and hope. It shadows the past and haunts the present and future. On one hand, the Agenda represents the ugly conflicts that at one time threatened to destroy Auroville. On
the other hand, it points to the aspiration and promise of collectively manifesting a greater way of being.

The idea of housing the *Agenda* in Auroville lives on at the institution known as The House of *Mother’s Agenda*, located at Pour Tous, one of the central focal points of the community’s activities. Pour Tous, literally, in French, “for all,” is the home of Auroville’s financial administrative offices. It also houses a food shop, café, cooking gas service stall, and the room where one may sit and read any part of the *Agenda*, perhaps researching what information contained within it is pertinent to a specific problem or activity. The idea that a written text should merit its own exclusively designated reading room suggests that the volumes of *Mother’s Agenda* are not mere objects. They are, in a sense, embodiments of divine forces. Animated with the power to disseminate not only knowledge, but also healing and transformative vibrations out into the world, they are very much living agents residing in Auroville.

The *Agenda* is for some people a text that is an extension of the Mother’s own body. As a long-term Dutch Aurovilian told me:

ALICIA: She was writing about her experiments with her body, you know. But I read this and I feel like she is reaching out to me. It’s like coming into contact with her. Like touching her hand, or seeing her smile.

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3 As of 2004, the main operations of this office are to move to the newly constructed Town Hall. The move had not yet taken place as of September of that year.
Thus, the *Agenda* exists not in the realm of representation but in the realm of unmediated presence. It is both a document of the Mother’s words and a living aspect of the Mother herself. Consequently, alongside all of the painful associations and intrigue the *Agenda* raises in many people, it is also something to be treated with respect and love.

To conclude, the *Agenda*’s ultimate significance lies on many levels. On one level it is a repository for memories about the community’s past. Many of these memories take on almost mythological dimensions in the present, with the figure of Satprem serving as a legendary symbol that while not universally esteemed, is a common motif inhabiting many residents’ accounts of Auroville. On another level, the *Agenda* is a tool with which community residents, with their disparate versions of what it means to be an Aurovilian, build a bridge between the past and the future. Many residents view processing the challenges and pain of another time as an important means for creating greater harmony in the community and, thereby, promoting Auroville’s continued growth. Finally, the *Agenda* is an aperture into a dimension of unmediated divine presence. As such it serves as a kind of catalyst to transform current conditions and vault human beings into the future. Clearly the social life of this text has played a crucial role in shaping Aurovilians’ experience of their community.
Another decisive text in Auroville is Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, *Savitri*. Like most of Sri Aurobindo’s writings, its complexity and level of abstraction provoke a sense of awe from readers inspiring some to devote their lives to deciphering, interpreting, meditating upon it, and performing it. Probably most devotees of Sri Aurobindo, whether they have read it or not, possess copies of *Savitri*. Its widespread appeal was underscored to me when a friend in Pondicherry commented that she had hit upon what was sure to be a highly successful business idea, namely cloth covers sewn to the exact dimensions of the recent edition of *Savitri*. Further evidence of the centrality of this text would be the fact that Savitri is a common name amongst devotees.

At 23,813 lines, it is the longest work of poetry in the English language. Its length, vocabulary and matter, make it demanding reading even for the most educated of English speakers. The following passage from the poem’s beginning exemplifies its rhythm and style:

> It was the hour before the Gods awake.  
> Across the path of the divine Event  
> The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone  
> In her unlit temple of eternity,  
> Lay stretched immobile upon Silence’s marge.  
> Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,  
> In the somber symbol of her eyeless muse  
> The abysm of the unbodied Infinite;  
> A fathomless zero occupied the world.  
> A power of fallen boundless self awake
Between the first and the last Nothingness
Recalling the tenebrous womb from which it came,
And the tardy process of mortality
And longed to reach its end in vacant Nought (1972b:1).

Sri Aurobindo began the piece before arriving in Pondicherry in 1910. By the time of his death in 1950 he had revised the poem several times. The broad outlines of Savitri mirror the famous story from Vyasa’s Sanskrit epic, the Mahabharata, in which the spiritual strength of Savitri overcomes death, bringing Satyavan, her beloved husband, back to life.

As read by many devotees, Savitri is a testament to the spiritual work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Georges Van Vrekhem, whose book on the lives of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo I discussed in Chapter 3, argues that Satyavan represents humanity, Savitri an incarnation of divine mother, and King Aswapathy (Savitri’s father in the original legend) is Sri Aurobindo himself. “Through evocative words of monumental precision and power, Sri Aurobindo details his own experiences of his yoga” (1997: 267). At the same time, Savitri’s impact goes beyond that of a chronicle of the author’s spiritual journey:

Sri Aurobindo has worded for posterity his own Work and that of the Mother in order to allow all prepared souls who read those words to breathe the same atmosphere and to contact the same realities behind the surface perceptible by the senses. According to the Mother, Savitri even contains the whole supramental yoga (269).

Savitri is a kind of mantra. Its words are not only connotatively significant but also important for the power of their sonority and rhythm. These aspects of the poem
can, people say, transform the consciousness of those who read the work aloud or silently.⁴

In a yoga with few required practices or rituals, reading Savitri is a highly conscious act that many people undertake singly and collectively on a regular basis. Like other Indian spiritual texts, Savitri is something to be revered as much as understood, to be enjoyed in a physical and aesthetic sense, and to be allowed to operate on a subtle, vibrational plane.⁵ As such, the book lends itself quite naturally to reading aloud, a practice that places Savitri squarely within traditional Hindu definitions of literature as something that is “heard” (sruti). One such collective reading that underscores the mantric qualities of the text was proposed in 2002 by one of the Sri Aurobindo organizations in Sri Lanka. To counteract the despair and darkness in the world today, the group advocated that Savitri be read aloud around the clock, with different Sri Aurobindo centers around the world,

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⁴ According to Sri Aurobindo himself, his successive versions of the piece follow his own progressive transformation of consciousness. In a letter to his disciple Nirodabaran, also a poet, Sri Aurobindo indicated, “Savitri has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one’s own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative” (Nirodabaran 2001: 543-544). As he ascended, he wrote from a different level.

⁵ For example, of the Ramcaritmanas, Philip Lutgendorf writes, “[...] the Manas is both an epic song to be savored aesthetically and a liturgy that plays an important role in everyday life – with the added observation that these two forms of “appreciation” generally cannot be separated (1991: 38-39).
including Auroville, taking turns. To my knowledge, the ambitious event has not yet taken place.

An emphasis on reading aloud allows plenty of opportunity for public readings. Such readings tend to take place at regular times in set locations. In Auroville the institution known as Savitri Bhavan, located in its own building close to the city center, coordinates such activities. The Bhavan even hosts classes such as “Learn English through Reading Savitri.” I attended one such class. Readers, whose native languages were as diverse as Italian, Russian, and Tamil during that particular session, took turns reading consecutive passages aloud, receiving pronunciation correction and vocabulary instruction from a native English speaker. These group readings and others like them allow people to come into contact not only with the subtler forces, but also with one another. The event provides people, who may or may not have similar life experiences, to join in a common purpose. They develop bonds of solidarity as they continually exchange the experience of Savitri, which functions among them as a symbol of their conjoined aspirations.

Producing and Policing Savitri

Given the great spiritual importance of Savitri to many, it is perhaps not surprising that the Ashram goes to lengths to protect official versions of its publication. All of the publications of Sri Aurobindo’s works are based upon his
handwritten manuscripts which are difficult to read. Deciphering it is the task of a few people who have been working in the Ashram Archives for years. In the case of Savitri, later sections of the poem were written while Sri Aurobindo's eyesight had begun to fail. At this time, he began to dictate the work as he composed it. Thus, the printed version is based upon an interpretation of Sri Aurobindo's handwriting, as well as a reading of the scribe's work, itself a kind of interpretation.

In 2001 the Ashram Archives set about to release a new version of Savitri involving a closer re-reading of the scribe's notations and an attempt to correct what had appeared to be vocabulary errors. The original edition has included numerous editing errors. As reported to me in 2004 by Ashram archivist and scholar, Peter Heehs, numerous people in and outside of the Ashram felt strongly that the original published version should not be modified. Part of their evidence for the original version's perfection was the fact that the Mother had personally given her blessings for it. Heehs told me that he had heard all kinds of justifications. One particularly memorable one aimed at attacking the fact that many of the archivists involved in the project were from the United States, which is the most powerful country in the world in material endeavors. India, on the other hand, had been the most powerful country in spiritual terms and Savitri was the complete condensation of this power and knowledge. Having changed the poem's mantric qualities amounted to nullifying India's powers. This meant that not only
could Americans and Indians not be equals, but also that it was for certain that the United States would rule the world. An equally irrational, but more threatening reaction to the issue came to a head in the form of a series of court cases against the archivists launched by devotees outside the Ashram or Auroville. The case first came to the Indian Supreme Court, which refused to entertain it, and then to district courts in Bengal. As of September 2004 the criminal case had been thrown out, never having received even a hearing, on the technical grounds that while the plaintiffs alleged forgery, forgery was not an issue in the matter at all. A civil suit is still pending. Nevertheless, the new edition is scheduled for release in 2004.

The emotions and rationalizations revealed by this episode indicate that for many Savitri has passed over into the realm of timeless, unchanging, religious scripture written infallibly by an omniscient, divine figure. By extension, this author would never have been associated with any mistake, whether committed by himself, by those who closest to him, or his later editors. As such, Savitri’s words should not be modified in any way. According to Heehs, many of Sri Aurobindo’s devotees hold a “puranic view” of the writings, meaning that they believe the the works were channeled wholly and complete into his pen. For people with this view to accept the documented fact that Sri Aurobindo was a writer, who like all

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6 The *puranas* are a class of ancient Sanskrit texts that deal with mythological stories.
writers went through successive drafts and revisions and made spelling and pen
errors, is difficult.

Understanding Savitri

As for what Savitri means to its devoted readers on an intellectual level, the
fact is that even for highly educated English speakers, Savitri’s dense language and
complex metaphors make the text at times unintelligible. Asking around, I found
that while this failure to understand the text was a common experience, it by no
means detracted from the value of reading the poem. A French Aurovillian
explained as follows:

MARC: If I want to be sincere, I don’t understand it. The Agenda I
understand a bit more, because Mother was speaking very simple sentences.
It was her day-to-day experiences. [...] I don’t say that I understand
everything, but it’s something that is closer to me. Savitri, even when it is
translated in French, is very difficult, to tell you the truth. Now the
importance of Savitri — there is certainly an importance. Mother said it.
There is certainly a great importance at the level of impact, vibratory
impact. Certainly when something is true, like a mantra or something [...].
I mean there is no doubt that it has a beneficial effect on people. But more
than that, Savitri, from my own experience — and I love to read out loud
parts here and there — frankly, I don’t understand. But it’s beautiful, it’s

The opaqueness of Savitri, coupled with its spiritual importance, easily
lends itself to the production of commentaries. Some of the interpreters earn
acclaim for their perceptions that make the text more accessible. Dr. Anand Reddy
is a widely celebrated commentator. A graduate of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram
school, Reddy earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Madras and now runs a center in Pondicherry dedicated to the study of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Known as the Sri Aurobindo Center for Advanced Research, the center is not affiliated with either the Ashram or Auroville, but is the latest manifestation of Reddy’s late father, Prof. V. Madhusudhan Reddy, who had the Mother’s blessings to establish a kind of university and research center. Both Ashramites and Aurovilians attend Reddy’s classes, along with other non-affiliated devotees living in the Pondy area. In addition, Reddy travels to Sri Aurobindo centers worldwide offering classes in Sri Aurobindo’s teachings. Well versed in all of Sri Aurobindo’s writings, Reddy makes connections across texts. He is thus an expert explicator of *Savitri* in light of the larger themes and principles of Integral Yoga. So successful and acclaimed are his multi-session lectures that they have been made available for sale in CD format under the titles, “*Savitri: Its Profound Significance*” and “*Savitri: A Legend, Symbol and Reality*.” These topics, and many others, form part of the curriculum of Reddy’s latest project, an on-line, Indian accredited program called “The University of Tomorrow.”

Another well-known *Savitri* commentator/translator is Dr. Mangesh V. Nadkarni, a self-avowed “upstart” who has no literary training and no Ashram background. Nadkarni is a highly educated man, however, holding a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of California at Los Angeles and having spent his
career as Professor for many years at the National University of Singapore. Since 1989, Nadkarni has operated popular “Savitri Camps” where he reads *Savitri* line by line. He has yet to get through the entire poem. Nadkarni knows that his approach is not traditional:

> Then there are some people who criticize me for bringing *Savitri* down to earth. It’s true that I don’t mystify, I demystify. I talk about the poem in terms of contemporary life because I’m a product of this century [20th], and because I’m enthralled by life, not disgusted by it, even while I’m aware that a greater power is needed to perfect it. There is a great deal of religiosity in India, and there’s a danger that *Savitri* will become some kind of holy writ. More than this, there’s a danger that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother themselves will be made into some kind of religion” (as interviewed in Alan 2000d: 7).

Here Nadkarni identifies a theme that echoes across the practice of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which I discussed in the previous chapter. There is a tension between treating the texts as revealed, unchanging truth, on the one hand, and critically reading and interpreting them, on the other.

The challenge that Reddy accepts is to revere *Savitri* as sacred without calcifying it. He, and others who agree with him, treat the texts of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as living worlds that beckon readers toward endless individual and group exploration. These readers reject blind faith. Although many (but by no means all) devotees operate from a faith that allows them to pursue and value mystic experience, it is widely understood that in Integral Yoga faith should be informed and systematic. It should involve the higher cognitive faculties and not

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collapse into simplistic religious devotion. Reading, re-reading, and trying to understand difficult texts is a way to ground one's spiritual connection with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in concrete practices without getting trapped in mindless ritual.

In effect, reading and interpreting are tools for putting the basic principles of the founders into practice in everyday life. Acts of reading are conduits through which the vast subtle worlds depicted in *Savitri* and the *Agenda* take on life. Reading is thus one of the ways in which the immaterial is made material, itself the central theme of Integral Yoga. Whether individually or collectively, reading the core texts like *Savitri* constitutes a ritual performance in which concepts and forces are manifest in embodied experience.

*Visual Art, Dance and Theater*

In addition to verbal commentary, *Savitri* inspires forms of visual representation as well. The text's narrative appeal and vivid metaphors make it rich material for a variety of media. During September 2000 I caught an exhibition of line drawings by Franz, a long-time Aurovilian who began studying and illustrating *Savitri* when he came to Auroville in 1974 (see Figure 24). Franz selected specific passages and then drew images that mix elements from Buddhist, Egyptian, and Greco-Roman iconography—along with the visual influence of William Blake and
Figure 24: Franz’s Savitri  
Image courtesy AV Today
Max Ernst. What is interesting about Franz’s drawings is his motivation. In an interview in AV Today, Franz related that before someone had suggested the idea, he had never considered exhibiting the works:

[...] [T]hese illustrations were never intended for anybody but myself. It was a way of submerging myself in the same atmosphere of Savitri- a kind of meditation – and the joy it gave me helped me through a difficult time” (as quoted in Alan 2000d: 7).

The important thing for Franz was not the artistic product but the process and the consciousness of making the drawings. He drew Savitri as a ritual act that brought him into contact with unseen forces. The images were the result of that process. It was only in re-contextualizing them within the space of an exhibition that the drawings took on the quality of illustrations.

Savitri has been performed on stage as well. In August 1997 in commemoration of the 125th anniversary of Sri Aurobindo’s birth, long-time Aurovilians Paulo, a modern dancer and choreographer from Brazil, and Joy, a graduate of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram School, created a dance version of Savitri. The piece was also inspired by two other significant and widely circulated interpretations of Savitri: voice recordings of the Mother reading excerpts from the poem and the organ music of Sunil Bhattacharya, an Ashramite who for thirty years had dedicated himself to fulfilling the Mother’s request that he compose music for sections of Savitri. According to Paulo’s program notes, the motivation behind the
piece was not to perform *Savitri*'s story, but to convey something about Sri Aurobindo’s yoga:

There is no narrative aim in it. According to my most natural approach to dance, I could say that it is rather an attempt to communicate in movement the deep and subtle emotional dimension of Mother’s reading and Sunil’s music. Please walk with us this pilgrimage of the soul.

The “emotional dimension” of the text is mentioned as if self-evident. Yet the Mother’s deep voice, tremulous with age, is all but unintelligible to an untrained ear. And appreciating Sunil’s hollow, almost eerie organ scales is, like anything else, a matter of taste. What is clear is that like many forms of artistic production in Auroville, the goal is to contact and interact with forces larger than oneself.

The revolutionary nature that many Aurovilians attribute to what they perceive as the groundbreaking work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother does not necessarily translate into aesthetic forms that are visibly “new.” *Savitri* was performed on a proscenium stage with dancers with varying levels of training and performance experience. The movement vocabulary reflected a heavy influence of Jose Limon whose technique Paulo had trained in. In short, in modern dance formal terms, there was nothing new going on. But what was different than most modern dance presentations was the attitude with which the dance was performed. When I spoke to some of the participants after the show, they related that they had struggled throughout with skepticism about whether they wanted to perform at all, as they were concerned that to display the work before an audience would be an
indulgence of the "ego." Other dancers took it upon themselves to perform
publicly as part of their yoga, meaning performing was something to be done with
consciousness. Some people expressed wanting to be mindful that the true
spectator for the event was the Mother. Interestingly, this view of the dance
converged with ideas about dance in India, which grew out of the devadasi tradition
in which a special class of women performed songs, simple dances and ritual
gestures in front of temple deities.

This opinion echoes in many aspects of life in Auroville. It is not at all
uncommon to hear people state that they are doing what they are doing "for
Mother," or that the work they are committed to is "Mother’s work." While
different in some regards, all statements support the belief that the attitude with
which something is done is what gives it importance. Like Franz’s drawings, the
dance was not an end in itself, but one component of a multi-dimensional spiritual
endeavor.

Seeing performance as part of the Yoga inherently means that at its core is a
process of transformation. This would seem almost axiomatic. One might argue
that in many places in the world performance involves varying degrees of
transformation of consciousness and identity, as a performer transports herself to a
world in which she is "not herself" and yet "not not herself" (Schechner 1985). In
Auroville, however, a double transformation is at work. The dancers not only
became characters from *Savitri*, they sought to allow the material to act upon them in ways that would change their own everyday identities permanently into something more perfect, powerful, and expansive. In an interview, Paulo stated, "My intention was to expose ourselves, as performers, to the beauty and power of the material we were dealing with and let ourselves be transformed by it" (as quoted in Jill 1999: 3). Following the logic of this statement one could say that the most important part of the dance was its aftermath, or in other words its "long-term consequences or follow through" (Schechner 1985: 19). A permanent change in the spiritual state of the performers was what the performance aimed for.

This change in consciousness was by far more important than any consideration for demonstrating to the audience the validity of a particular interpretation of the text. In focusing on inner states of being, technique was no longer something to strive towards, nor could how well the dancers danced technically be used as a criterion for evaluating the performance. In the same interview, Paulo went on to state, "[...] I was convinced that, in the context of communicating *Savitri*, our inner attitude rather than our dance skills would speak to the audience" (as quoted in Jill 1999: 3). The idea of manifesting something not readily available to the eye is one of the main themes of Integral Yoga. With such an emphasis on the presence in the world of advanced states of consciousness and
in harmonizing the states of the actors’ consciousness with those of the spectators, the *Savitri* dance was as much ritual as it was theater.

The same emphasis on inner states was at work in a theatrical rendition of one particular scene of *Savitri*, “The Debate of Love and Death.” Performed in 1999 by two Aurovilian actors working for a year with an Aurovilian director, the play enacts a dialogue between Death and Savitri, who convinces him that he must return her beloved Satyavan to life. In an interview Srimoyi, the lead actress, stated, “It [the performance] did something to me. I feel closer to Them than ever before” (3). Thus, the performance process threw the actress into contact with something much larger than the mere characters on the page. It brought to life the connection between the *Savitri* story and the spiritual force of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Working in the realm of greater forces is intensive. The article in *AV Today* about the production indicates that the process demanded hard effort with many hours of vocal exercises and other routines aimed at building up endurance. These rehearsal rigors laid the ground for the creation of “a very strong atmosphere” which hosted “a presence which was enormous.” Operating in this way was taxing emotionally. Srimoyi recounts having to keep herself from crying at the end of a performance. It was even a dangerous experience. Both Srimoyi and the actor playing Death “felt the need to call for protection, to feel safe while playing such an
intense and multi-dimensional scene.” In this way, working with Savitri exposed the actors to dimensions of reality unlived in everyday life. Their roles were not just representing the characters, but also communing with them. The rehearsal process was largely a preparation for opening the performers' bodies, hearts, and souls to those forces so that they would be manifest on the stage. This does not in any way mean that the actors lost consciousness or entered some kind of trance. It is more that during the performance they experienced in an abbreviated form the goal of Integral Yoga, namely to transform subtle and physical states of being into deeper realities and modes of being.

Because acting in this way involves putting spiritual beliefs into concrete practice, it is perhaps not surprising that for some Aurovilians the stage productions of Savitri, like other theatrical versions of works either written by the Mother or Sri Aurobindo or written about them, are deemed the only appropriate material to be staged and viewed in Auroville. At least a few people feel that more conventional plays, whether classical or avant-garde, belong to the outside world and are irrelevant for the world that Aurovilians are creating.

Others, however, have a different view. I spoke at length with Juliette, who had worked as a professional actress in France before coming to India and remaining in the community for many years. When I spoke with her in 2000, she had since returned to France but continued to make regular bi-annual visits. During
the 1970s, Juliette and her husband, also a stalwart of the French theatrical and television world, put on several plays with simple costumes and props in Aspiration, Auroville’s first settlement. According to these informants, the dramas were always a great hit and many people were eager to participate in them as actors and stagehands. The couple rarely chose from among the few plays written by the Mother herself, nor did they opt to adapt Sri Aurobindo’s works. Instead they opted for works such as those of Shakespeare or Moliere. When I asked Juliette why, she commented:

If you want to express something, you should first think, and then feel and then interpret, identify yourself with it. If you don’t know that experience, that spiritual experience, how can you interpret [it]? You first have to live the experience and then you can re-give it, but if you just take it mentally and then show it, it means nothing, according to my view. To be able to perform something, you must have that level of the consciousness. If Sri Aurobindo has written a high level of consciousness play, from my point of view, I am not ready to play, to interpret that, because I am not at that level. I am not at the level of Savitri, so how can I interpret Savitri? Maybe as a dancer it is possible, but not as an actor (2000).

To some extent, Juliette’s view, and that of the actors in the Savitri production, are similar. Both see that the successful staging of Savitri depends upon the actors’ having access to superior forms of awareness than that of normal everyday life. According to the French actress, one must have truly lived the experience of Savitri and her consciousness in order to play her. For the actors in the production, however, “inner work” and physical preparation were sufficient for them to gain
enough understanding of the forces they sought to represent so that they could become them on the stage.

As for whether the audience felt similarly transformed, it is hard to say. Some people that I spoke with felt that the play, while not so interesting on the surface, managed to create an environment that brought *Savitri* to life. In the obvious intensity of the experience of the actors, some spectators felt that the production pointed towards a new kind of theatre, not in terms of aesthetics but at the level of consciousness. Naturally, as always in the theater business, some other audience members were not particularly impressed, while others found the production outright boring.

I found the same spectrum of opinion in response to my informal talks with people about the dance version of *Savitri*. While the intention may have been for the inner attitude of the performers to become visible to the audience, this did not succeed for all viewers. Even when I asked those who felt that they had seen something special in this regard, they were unable to express what exactly it was that had happened on the stage that led them to conclude that the performers had been working in ways different from ordinary actors or dancers. A few people were disinterested in the question altogether and expressed boredom over what they perceived as a lack of technical skill and polish.
What many of these viewpoints had in common, however, was a vague sense of pride at the production:

BANI: I was just so happy to see them up on the stage, no matter what. I thought it was great that the community could put on a production like that. Even though I am not a dancer myself, I felt like I was together with them up there (2000).

It is important to remember that when such pieces are performed in Auroville, they are played to a house of people most of whom at least know the actors by sight and many of whom know them quite well. This cultivates a sense of empathy and camaraderie between performer and spectator of the sort that one would expect to happen in the course of a community-based theater production, even though in Auroville what is presented on the stage is rarely drawn from the everyday life of the community itself. A connection is made in the mind of viewers between their own bodies and that of the collective; the separation between subject and object is diminished by the empathy between them.

Thus, in addition to witnessing spiritual forces at play, staged performances of Savitri give Aurovilians the chance to share meanings and experience and thereby recognize themselves as members of a community. In a place where people have few opportunities to come together, such rare moments are an important part of an Aurovilian’s sense of place and belonging. It is no wonder that such performances remain in people’s memories long after.
Satirical Savitri

Ritualized readings, displays, concerts, and theatricalizations all enter into “official” interpretations of Savitri. They each are in tune with institutional messages that emphasize the poem’s sacred dimensions. At issue is the belief that Savitri is worthy of being read and re-read because doing so helps spiritual progress. It would be difficult to claim otherwise in any public forum in Auroville. The importance of the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother only grows with passing years. One long-time Ashramite commented to me that it was noteworthy the extent to which Sri Aurobindo’s ethos, both in Auroville and the Ashram, was becoming a “text-based religion.”

And yet, and this is so often the case in Auroville, I encountered many people who had no great belief in Savitri. Some had no particular interest in the work on literary grounds either. As an American, who left Auroville in the early 1980s once humorously commented to me on a visit to Auroville in 2003, “Sri Aurobindo was indeed a great writer, but Savitri is so long and boring...or maybe it’s just because I’ve never read it!”

A more ironic take on the subject, and an exception to the rule that sacred material is off limits for humor or critique in public forums, appeared in 2000 in “Roughspeak,” a column published periodically in the locally circulated, weekly bulletin, AV News. “Roughspeak” is the creation of Shah, a long-time North Indian
Aurovilian, known for his irreverent humor. According to Shah, he has been outspoken so many times and has "pissed off" so many individuals that no one can touch him anymore. The theme of many of his columns is the general absurdity of conflicts in Auroville, the seeming inability of Aurovilians to do anything about them, and the hypocrisy of the tendency to see life in Auroville as more spiritual or enlightened than anywhere else. In a spoof about Y2K and the present state of affairs in Auroville, "Roughspeak" presented readers with a mock survey entitled, "Are You AV2K Compliant?" as a means of collecting members for the establishment of an Intelligent Aurovilians’ Club. The humorous, multiple-choice questions on the survey went to the core of some widely held, but rarely voiced, views about specific circumstances. Among them:

What is the first line in Savitri?

A. Wanna be startin’ somethin’...
B. We don’t need no education...
C. Oh, show me the way to the next...
D. Twas the hour before...

The question frames the central problematic of holding something as sacred, when in all likelihood one has never read it or has understood little of it. Shah also pokes fun at how overtly professing spirituality may be a mask for one’s true interests. The column’s humor, while unacceptable to some, presents an opportunity for people to reflect on the religious dimension of aspects of their lives, exposing unspoken rules for talking about the sacred by so obviously flaunting them. The
gist of the survey is that things are as raunchy and disorganized in Auroville as they are anywhere else. Shah declares that being an Aurovilian is not what one may purport it to be and that this is a fact that can be laughed at. Shah in this way gives voice to an idiosyncratic opinion that intervenes into the hegemonic discourses about communal identity. Thus, the “Roughspeak” column is yet another meaningful reading of the community’s core texts.

**Conclusion:**

As I argue throughout this dissertation, Aurovilians read and perform the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in a host of ways. In the previous chapter I focused primarily on the ways in which people cite texts, as well as attempt to enact them, in their efforts to shape the community’s development. In this present chapter, I have sought to demonstrate that texts that comprise the script for Auroville are not only what appears on the printed page, nor is their significance confined solely to the uses to which people put them. Important writings have important stories behind them. Moreover, they are the inspiration for the creation of new stories in the form of art and ritual through which Aurovilians convene with one another and larger forces.

*Mother’s Agenda* plays an important role as a symbol of a pivotal moment in the community’s history. Implicated in a time of uncertainty and conflict, the
Agenda is important not only as a guidebook for Auroville, but also as a rallying point for differing views about the community’s past. Its enigmatic author, Satprem, is an almost legendary figure, widely respected, but revered by some in secret. His followers have a different take on what it means to be an Aurovilian, since Auroville as an institution promotes reverence exclusively for Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The questions surrounding Satprem and his followers, and the general bitterness about past conflicts over the future of Auroville, continue to impose substantial obstacles to the community’s development in the minds of many of its long-term residents.

Savitri has an altogether different influence. A long, epic work in dense, archaic language, Savitri’s importance lies not solely in its content – both the storyline and as an allegory of the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother -- but perhaps more importantly, as a kind of mantra whose vibrations can transform readers, listeners and the world. Its suggestive imagery and the power of its tale of death conquered have inspired multiple new texts, including theatrical ones. In a spiritual tradition with few required practices, the creation of representations of Savitri is a ritual act in which people bring themselves into intense proximity with the forces that Savitri depicts. In performance, Savitri’s importance expands outward from the intensity of the actors and into the collective body of Auroville, as people
affirm the fundamental values and principles upon which their community is based and that, presumably, they hold in common.

The centrality of Savitri, and other writings, is not lost on Aurovilians themselves. Its role as an official symbol of Auroville makes its ubiquity an apt target for those who might have a more ironic view of the place. Although it is the focus of so much public attention, whether people actually read, remember, or generally give it much importance in the midst of their busy lives is another question. As Shah and his “Roughspeak” column remind us, what people believe they aspire to be is often humorously at odds with what they actually are. Shah’s irreverent appropriation of the name of one of Auroville’s key texts forms the basis for a witty bite at official ways in which the community conceptualizes itself. Thus, the same text can serve any number of conflicting agendas and perspectives on Auroville.

The multiplicity of ways in which people read, interpret and eventually enact the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo negates the possibility of seeing the importance of these texts in singular ways. What I have termed “the social life of texts” stands at odds with commonly held assumptions about the divine capacity of these texts to express timeless and unchanging revealed truths. The processes through which texts enter public discourse entangle them in social interactions that imply not solely the convening with greater forces, but also everyday conflicts. In
other words, the script that guides Auroville is contested ground. As I hope to demonstrate in the following chapter the same holds true for reading and interpreting the images and symbols of the director of Auroville’s ongoing performance, the Mother.
CHAPTER 5

THE MOTHER OF AUROVILLE

At the center of the multicultural, loosely organized, and spatially disperse community of Auroville stands a dynamic, centering force: the Mother. The Mother's power manifests itself in innumerable ways, whether one sees her as divine or human. Ever-present on the liminal borders of access and distance, form and formlessness, the quotidian and the sacred, the Mother symbolizes the performative nature of the spiritual quest. Her invisible shape miraculously gives form to the contours of the collective. She incarnates across the landscape of Auroville through prosthetic bodies that in turn summon her into being with what would seem the same intense proximity and charisma as if she were present in the flesh. No matter what one thinks of her, and there are astonishingly different perceptions about her, Auroville exists because of her. Auroville is the live, ongoing performance of her dream; the Mother stands simultaneously as the director, the principle actor and the spectator of this grand œuvre.

This chapter explores this unseen mover as the primary symbol that acts as a common point of reference in Aurovilians' ongoing formulations and contestations of their collective identity. In the first section, I will examine who the Mother was, in terms of her life history and work. I will look at her as a human being who
moved through extraordinary circumstances and whose path in this world, at an
unusual moment in time, was shaped by feminist courage and global cultural
trajectories. In the second section, I grapple with the multiplicity of perceptions
that Aurovilians and visitors have about the Mother’s charisma. These serve as
reminders of the fact that there are no singular narratives to be found in any spiritual
movement or institution. I will examine what some followers say about the
Mother’s divine nature, which I will relate to discussions about traditional South
Indian cults of goddess worship. In the final section, I will discuss the ways in
which the Mother has continued to act in the lives of individuals and the community
since her death in 1972. I will argue that particular artifacts embody the Mother,
materializing her force in ways available to the senses. Through these artifacts
Aurovilians deconstruct the notion of a divide between the spiritual world and the
material one. As such, these material instances are more than symbolic repositories
of spiritual meaning and value. Through these bodies the Mother is not a static

1 In recent years both scholars and practitioners of various religions have examined
feminine concepts of the divine and women’s roles in religion (see Billington and
Green 1996, Kinsley 1989, Olson 1983, Preston 1982). In addition, the growth of
the environmental movement has gone hand in hand with the ethos of
“ecofeminism” (Diamond and Orenstein 1990). I see the appeal of the Mother to
Europeans and Americans in conversation with this more general turn of attention
towards goddesses, although for reasons that will emerge, I locate the Mother more
specifically within the context of discussions about Hindu ideas and practices
associated with the female aspect of divinity.
object of devotion, but an actor in the unfolding performance of her utopian global vision.

In his description of "dominant symbols," Turner makes the claim such icons and artifacts act as "a positive force in an activity field" (1967: 27-30). In other words, they make things happen. Elaborating upon this definition, Ness equates such symbols with magnets, stating, "Magnetism is interest in motion. It is the movement of collection, or crowd-forming, and of city-making" (1992: 58). In this sense, contemporary embodiments of the Mother are dominant symbols that invest Auroville with a magnetism that draws all kind of people. This magnetism makes the community a destination and figures prominently in residents’ conceptualizations of Auroville as a particular place. As such, it is impossible to think about Auroville or what it means to be an Aurovilian outside of considering the ways in which the Mother's immediate presence manifests.

Although the focus of the chapter is on the Mother's identity, there is also a necessary emphasis on the mutual relationships between her and Aurovilians. One of the premises of my argument is that someone is a "guru," "deity," or "avatar," on the basis of the relationships that exist between individuals so designated and the people who recognize them as such. Heinrich Von Stietencron touches upon this same theme when he states, "A charismatic person whom nobody recognizes as such would go unnoticed and have no impact. Charisma, therefore, reveals itself
always in interaction” (2001: 31). It is not my concern here to elucidate the Mother’s essence, so much as it is to understand the social processes and perceptions through which she came to be who she is and through which she continues to be engaged in the lives of those who look to her. This grounds my work in an experiential approach that understands the Mother’s followers on their own terms. This perspective, developed amongst others by the scholars included in a recent collection of essays about Hindu goddesses, hopes to “resist the reductionism about deities and religious matters in general that has characterized much so-called secular thought in recent centuries, but that has been a part of the Western heritage since classical Greece” (Coburn 2001). While my view proceeds from a notion of human experience as socially constructed, the social relationships I highlight are bi-lateral. They are as much about people interacting with the Mother, as they are about her interacting with them.

In keeping with these parameters, I have had to examine my own relationship with the Mother. Although I see the value of explicitly locating oneself in relation to one’s material, the autobiographical turn in ethnographic literature is something I view with ambivalence. I have found many examples of such writing to be self-indulgent, actually effacing the experiences of informants that the ethnographer presumably has set out to honor. Despite this, I have decided to whole-heartedly insert myself into this chapter, because I realize that the Mother
has consistently been making cameo appearances in the drama of my own life and that I, like my Aurovilian informants, have been actively engaged in the business of creating interpretations about her.

This being acknowledged, if I speak not from the position of a "devotee," it is not because I do not admire the Mother, or disregard her wisdom. On the contrary, I see her as an extraordinary individual and seek understanding for my own life in much of what she has to say. My rejection of the designation "devotee" is based upon my own experiences. The term "devotee" raises a host of unpleasant associations with people I have known following all kinds of spiritual paths and gurus from my childhood onward. Their narrow-minded zeal, in my view, was unbearable. Yet even as I say this, I am about to pull the rug out from under myself. I am about to demonstrate how being a devotee means radically different things to different people. In fact, many of the people whom I speak of here would probably strongly resist the label. To those, I apologize. Putting it in Sri Aurobindo’s terms, a revolution in consciousness has not yet come about down here that permits me a language that does not inevitably run the risk, even when I wish it otherwise, of reifying complexities into generalities and imposing categories that are unduly rigid for the rich diversity of reality they presumably contain.
The Mother's Life

One of the earliest memories of my childhood is the image of two small, black-framed photographic reprints of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo as children that were hung on the wall of my room. The figures looked stiff and formal, unsmilingly looking into the camera, in the way that most people at the beginning of the photographic era looked when they posed for pictures. Mother wore a lacy, black frock and must have been, I would guess, eight or nine (see Figure 25). I remember thinking how strange it was that people changed so much over time. Here she looked nothing like she did in the photo that sat on my parents’ dresser, a photo taken when the Mother was in her 90s (see Figure 26). The pretty child with dark luminous eyes was unrecognizable as the wrinkled, balding old lady that grinned at me. It was only some thirty years later that I had any sense of the singularly fascinating story that had carried that person from one phase of life to another. In what follows, I relate what I have learned of that story from secondary sources written either by devotees, or else coming from what the Mother said about herself.² Naturally, the biographies of legendary figures are often embellished or otherwise suspect. But given that this is the version that most devotees know

² It was outside the scope and possibility of my research to conduct original research of primary documents about the Mother's life. Consequently, I rely here primarily on the details as put forth by the biography Van Vrekehm 2000.
Figure 25: Mirra Alfassa around age 5 (circa 1882)  
Aurobindo Ghose around age 11 (circa 1884)  
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Figure 26: The Mother at age 86 in 1964
Photographer unknown
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
(although many may not be aware of the details), it is interesting to consider it in light of how the Mother is represented as a person to those who revere her.

The Mother was born Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa on February 21, 1878 in Paris to Jewish parents. She had one brother, Matteo, who had been born slightly earlier in Alexandria, Egypt in 1876. Her father, a pragmatic, successful banker, was Turkish and her mother, a strong-minded, educated woman, was Egyptian. Life in the household was extremely bourgeois, including all the benefits of cultural refinement and education. Even when her father's banking business went bankrupt in the wake of the Panama Scandal of the early 1870s, when international funds for a new canal were mishandled by several parties, life continued to be sheltered even if difficult. Although Alfassa was a self-avowed materialist at that time, meaning that she believed only in what she could see and touch, she began having paranormal experiences from a very early age, which became the source of inspiration for her intense interest in occult practices as a young adult (Van Vrekhem 2000). After completing private school with top marks, Alfassa entered an art school in Paris. She lived the next ten years of her life as a member of the Parisian bohemia. She knew many of the city's top artists and intellectuals, and Matisse, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Rodin, and the writer Anatole France were among her friends (Wilfried 1986: 8, 15; Van Vrekhem 2000: 23). In 1897 she married the
artist Henri Morisset and soon afterwards had her first and only child, Andre.³
She continued her own artistic work, and although she was never interested in
promoting herself towards conventional success, she had paintings on exhibit at the
prestigious Salon de la Societe Nationale des Beaux-Arts in 1903, 1904 and 1905
(Van Vrekhem 2000: 22). While on the surface fully engaged with the era that has
come to be known as La Belle Epoque, on the inside Alfassa yearned for other
knowledge. She was an avid reader, and also learned everything her brother was
being taught, including higher mathematics. She did not feel that any of it helped
in understanding the occult experiences she was having (Nahar 1986: 173-4).

Later in life the Mother looked back and commented, “Between the age of
eighteen and twenty, I attained a conscious and constant union with the divine
Presence and I had done it all alone, with absolutely nobody to help me, not even
books. When I found one – a little later I got hold of Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* – it
seemed to me such a wonderful thing, you see, that somebody could explain to me!
This made me gain in a few months what would perhaps have taken me years to do”
(Das 1978: 54). In this way Alfassa’s contact with the mystical traditions of the
East began. Shortly after this time, she read a French translation of the *Bhagavad
Gita* on the advise of Jnanendranath Chakravarti, a visiting Indian mathematics

³ In adulthood Andre came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where he resided with
other devotees for some time before returning to France. He later married and had
a child, who as a young man lived for some time in Auroville. The Mother’s
grandson currently lives in Pondicherry.
professor and Vice-Chancellor of Lucknow University, who was also a member of the Theosophical Society.

The social currents of Orientalism that made such contacts possible for Alfassa were accompanied by a wave of intense, if somewhat clandestine, interest in occultism on the part of many people in Europe and the United States. Alfassa participated fully in this movement, joining a discussion group called Idea and editing a journal known as the *Revue Cosmique*. At this time she made the acquaintance of the renowned occultist, Max Theon. Alfassa traveled alone to Tlemcen, Algeria in 1906, where she underwent a period of intense training with Theon and his wife, Alma. This time marked a significant change in her life, launching Alfassa with renewed vigor upon the path of research into consciousness that would occupy her for the rest of her days.

In 1908 Alfassa divorced her husband. She invested herself even more fully for the next years in participating in the occult movement in Paris, convening meetings, and making contact with a host of spiritual and like-minded international travelers, including Alexandra David-Neel (known for her writings on Tibet), the Sufi mystic and musician Inayat Khan, and Abdul Baha (the founder of the Baha’i faith). Theon and all of these figures, like the Mother herself, led highly traveled lives. The cultural trends to which they contributed bore the stamp of their creative appropriation and synthesis of a vast repertoire of ideas and symbols drawn from a
variety of cultural and historical contexts. They are important reminders of the fact that “globalization,” generally construed as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, can be a misleading term.

Alfassa’s global life continued after 1911 when she married a French lawyer, Paul Richard. In 1914 she traveled with him to Pondicherry, a French colony, where he was to participate in elections for the French outpost’s representative to the Chamber of Deputies. Upon her arrival she went to meet Sri Aurobindo, whom Paul Richard had met some years earlier and respected greatly. As she would relate later in life, from the moment she saw him standing at the top of a staircase, Alfassa recognized in Sri Aurobindo the one and the same “being of light” she had seen in earlier visions (Nahar 1997: 579-80). She, along with her husband, joined Sri Aurobindo’s circle of disciples and after a time they collaborated with him in founding the philosophical journal, Arya.

She was not able to remain with Sri Aurobindo at that time, however. With the outbreak of WWI, she and Paul Richard returned to France. Shortly thereafter they left to spend 1916-1920 in Japan, residing primarily in Kyoto. A bit of a cultural chameleon, it was Alfassa’s custom to adopt local dress in her travels and in Japan she wore a kimono, took a Japanese name and studied Japanese (see Figure 27). Later she would write: “If one does not submit to rules there [in Japan], one may live as Europeans do, who are considered barbarians and looked
Figure 27: The Mother in Tokyo in 1916
Photographer unknown
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
upon as intruders; but if you want to live a Japanese life among the Japanese, you must do as they do, otherwise you make them so unhappy that you can’t have any relation with them” (1977a: 309). While Alfassa’s ability to selectively adopt local practices was a sign of her privileged racial and class position as a well-placed European, one might guess that it would have been a highly unusual move for such a person at that time. Her informal ethnographic observations and determination to “go native” in order to enter into more direct contact with cultural others, pays tribute to a heritage of women’s travel experience that, while often unacknowledged, pre-dates some of the later moves of the discipline of anthropology.⁴

As elucidated by Jayawardena, during the four years in Japan Alfassa “made known some of her radical views on political and social questions” (1995: 211). This included outlining a specifically feminist stance, an aspect of her identity that I have never seen given much attention in any of the writings by devotees that I have read. In 1916 she published an article entitled, “Woman and the War” in a Japanese newspaper, and around the same time gave a talk, “To the Women of Japan.” In these documents she criticized male aggression and promoted an alternative view for progress stating, “Doubtless, women’s politics would bring about a tendency to disinterestedness and more humanitarian solutions” (1978: 145). She observed that

⁴ See the edited collection of Behar and Gordon 1995 for a comprehensive treatment of the history and politics of women writing culture.
women were replacing men in their traditional roles and that these changes were going to come as a surprise to those who looked upon women as “objects of pleasure or distraction” or “the guardian of their hearth and the mother of their children.” At the same time she predicted that one day an equality between the sexes would indeed exist and that their relationship would be one of mutual collaboration.

A relationship of mutual collaboration is what Alfassa established with Sri Aurobindo when she returned, along with Richard, to Pondicherry in 1920. Shortly after this time Richard left Pondicherry, later filing for divorce. (Van Vrekhem 2000: 194-5). Alfassa remained behind, moved into the same house as Sri Aurobindo and his companions and began organizing what was steadily growing from a small circle of comrades and disciples into an ashram. Not surprisingly, it was at first difficult for some of the disciples to accept her as both a woman and a European. From the start, however, Sri Aurobindo gave her tremendous importance. Although she was called by her name “Mirra,” at some point in the early 1920s – the exact date is not known - Sri Aurobindo began to refer to her as “the Mother” (Gupta and Amrita 1969: 82-3). According to everything I have ever read about her, and what long-time Ashramites who were present while Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were alive have said, the Mother was not Sri
Aurobindo’s domestic partner, but a colleague whom he regarded as his full equal and indispensable for his spiritual work.

In 1926 Sri Aurobindo withdrew from public life, to continue his research and writing in his private quarters, where only the Mother and a handful of very close devotees could see him. The Mother was now busier than ever, directing the Ashram operations and providing guidance and support to devotees. At the same time period there were other institutions afoot in South India, which combined Indian and European cultural influences. For example, Madras was home to both the Theosophical Society under the direction of Annie Besant, and the Kalakshetra dance school founded by Rukmini Devi, the Brahman wife of a noted Theosophist. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram, however, was to be noted for its extensive organization and cleanliness. Under the Mother’s direction the Ashram became a self-sufficient and productive center, supported by its own industries and farms. True in her commitment to material order and progress, the Mother created an atmosphere of organization, efficiency, and hygiene that were unheard of in India at that time and which drew the admiration of many Indians, whether they believed in her divinity or not. Among her many contributions was the establishment of a canteen in 1934. It is said that it has not failed to produce three meals a day for Ashramites and visitors since that time. She also created comprehensive sports program mandatory for Ashramites of all ages (see Figure 28).
Figure 28: The Mother playing tennis in the 1950s
Photographer unknown
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Her innovations were often radical, including the introduction of the wearing of shorts for the physical training of men and women alike. One of her crowning achievements is the Ashram School, which started in 1943 and continues to be considered one of the finest educations available in India. Based upon her and Sri Aurobindo’s concepts about an integral education, the idea is that students need to be free from drudgery so that their intellectual, artistic and physical development can open the mind to receive inspiration, creativity, and intuition. Students progress at their own pace, learn several languages fluently, and conduct independent research, while free of the competitive compulsion of exams and diplomas.

The Mother continued to be active long after the death of Sri Aurobindo in 1950. Towards the end of her life, she dedicated herself not only to her Ashram duties, but also to outlining her vision for a future society. This was the impetus leading to the founding of Auroville. She became a woman who was highly regarded by people from many levels of society and from different parts of India. Both as a result of her association with Aurobindo and her own achievements, she gained the respect of many important Indian leaders, several of whom visited the Ashram over the years (see Figure 29).

In her discussion of the ways in which Western women charted an alternative history of colonialism, Jayawardena (1995) recognizes the dynamism
Figure 29: From left to right: The Mother, Prime Minister Nehru, Chief Minister Kamraj of Tamil Nadu State, Indira Gandhi, and first President of India Lal Bahadur Shastri at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram on September 29, 1955
Photographer unknown
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
and feminist consciousness of those who were linked to nationalist, socialist, reformist, missionary and medical projects in South Asia. Such women were representatives of the “new woman” emerging in Europe, the United States and in Asia through the valiant efforts of a new wave of radical, courageous activists. Comparing the life of the Mother of Pondicherry with Vivekananda’s devotee, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), and Gandhi’s follower, Mira Behn (Margaret Slade), Jayawardena says:

The phenomenon of the white “sisters” and “holy mothers” was extraordinary. While they were absorbed into Indian society and culture, outliving their gurus and making India their home, they also introduced modern European methods of education, modernism in art, and an appreciation of Western music and culture. They were not only white women “appropriating the Other” in religion and culture, but were persons with a vision of a politically independent new India...[T]hey moved from being rebels in Europe to nationally honored persons in India (180-181).

Looking at the Mother’s life history, there is no doubt that she was a highly unusual woman, with an independent spirit and tremendous energy, talent, and dedication.

**Interpreting the Mother**

As I look back on my own life history growing up in a household in which the Mother was a central figure, it strikes me as odd that it was difficult to appreciate her as the singular person she was. Had I known something of her life history, I might have felt more receptive to her on my own terms. That I would favor quite a different interpretation over the one that was conveyed to me as a child
stands as a case in point in claiming how varied individual perceptions about the
Mother can be. While guru figures are usually referenced in official publications of
their organizations as people whose significance is understood in similar ways by
all who follow them, this is probably never the case. The multiplicity of readings
that people make of the Mother reminds one that there are no single narratives of
any spiritual ethos, a deceptively simple truth that scholars of religious movements
and organizations in India have not often recognized. For example, in his analysis
of the Sri Satya Sai Baba movement, Babb (1986) devotes considerable attention to
the image Sai Baba projects and the role of the miracles he performs. When it
comes to examining what these things actually mean to followers, Babb restricts
himself to general themes, a mode of analysis I find difficult to accept, especially
given the broad spectrum of class and cultural identities that one finds amongst
Indian and international followers of the Sai Baba movement. In contrast, in
Narayan’s analysis (1989) of the storytelling mode of religious instruction
imparted by a guru she calls “Swamiji,” she acknowledges that different devotees
apply the lessons of the stories to their own ends and in light of their own
experiences. What she does not consider, however, are the processes through which
particular interpretations of stories and particular readings of Swamiji as a spiritual
figure come to take precedence over others in the socio-ideological power struggles
that take place among devotees. Nor does she recognize the ways in which
experience with the guru can be packaged and showcased by devotees in their efforts to create a certain image for themselves in and even beyond their community.

If any scholar is attuned to the union of spirituality and power it is McKean (1996), whose brilliant analysis of the role of gurus in Hindu nationalism highlights the insidious links that such figures and their institutions can forge between the heavenly promise of the spiritual world and the dangerous reality of this one. Nevertheless, while treating the discourses produced by these organizations with analytical finesse, even McKean flattens the experience of devotees by seeing them in monolithic terms.

My own academic and personal experience suggests to me that gurus actually signify radically different things to different people and fulfill multiple and contradictory roles in follower’s lives. Possible interpretations are often at odds with one another; individuals and groups can become deeply invested in promoting their versions over others and in mobilizing particular images of the guru in order to justify their own actions. Sometimes, as in the case of Mother, the symbolism and significance that surrounds the spiritual figurehead inserts her/him into social contexts that are worlds apart from the institutions that traditionally foster and monitor her/his legacy. But this ambiguity and flexibility serves the guru well in
that these qualities allow her/him to appeal to large groups of people across time, social classes, and cultures.

In what follows I will present a series of voices that represent similar and radically different perspectives on the Mother's identity and importance. Most come from Aurovilians, but I have also included the opinions of those who no longer live in the community, those who are closely associated, and even a few long-term visitors. Some of the quotations I leave to stand on their own; others that stimulate my thinking I comment upon. I make no claim to be objective in my selection or editing of this material. I have appropriated and oriented these quotations and placed them alongside excerpts from my fieldnotes to illustrate what I would like to say, not only about the multivalent significance of the Mother, but also about the ambiguous nature of her supposed divinity. Some people like to approach her as an inspired human being. Others perceive her as an enlightened person, someone who through great effort transcended this world, even as she lived fully in it. Then there are those who believe firmly that she was divine, a being quite beyond the human. The people who believe this do not see divinity in the same way. To some the reference is abstract; for others it fits into preconceived notions about avatars or goddesses.

What all these viewpoints have in common is that they are grounded in personal relationships that people establish with the Mother, however she appears to
them. These relationships imply certain responsibilities and/or expectations from both sides. They are important because they are the vehicle for the Mother’s continued, living presence in Auroville. It is also important to remember that however many revere the Mother, others question her authority and thought. Scholars eager to honor the experience of their informants may overlook the fact that even among the faithful, gurus and gods can be critiqued and laughed at, even if such skepticism and humor are inadmissible in public forums.

Mother the Person

The first thing that struck me as I began to ask people about the Mother was my needing to let go of any preconceptions I might have had about those living in Auroville all seeing themselves as devotees who see the Mother in clearly religious terms. The fact emerges quickly that even among people for whom Mother has been an enormous influence and who have dedicated their lives to understanding some of the principles she talked about, she does not figure as a goddess or even a guru. This is not unusual. Religion is not only an embodiment of spiritual belief, but also a corpus of cultural practices (Asad 1993). For many Aurovilians the basic components of religion and spirituality are not to be found in transcendence, but are located in the mundane stream of everyday activity. As a middle-aged, Indian
Aurovilian, who has lived in the community for many years and runs a successful business, told me:

VIJAY: You know, having grown up with Mother and having grown up in the Ashram, I would say that I don’t place Mother on as high of a pedestal as most Aurovilians do. Not to say that it wasn’t an important presence in my life, and it is an important presence in my life. When I was growing up, basically any decision that was of any importance you would go to the Mother and say, “Mother, is it OK if we do this?” But I never thought that I didn’t have a right to disagree with it. My mind is not clear what “divine” means. But if it means anything like she’s a god or a goddess, then it’s definitely not what I have in mind. But, uh, I always thought of her as a guide, as somebody who would guide you on the path that you take. But I always thought of the path as being extremely long and a path that I was going to make a lot of mistakes on and fall off of many times. But when she was alive, even in daily life she would guide, she would help. I saw her doing it to me, and I saw her doing it to my friends, and I saw her doing it to my mother and my father. So that was just what we assumed. I don’t feel like I have a direct contact with her or something now that she’s gone. I don’t feel that. And when it comes to the whole idea of divine, I don’t want it put on me. If somebody else has a direct connection with that, that’s OK. But I don’t... I feel I am much more secular in that sense. I’m very, very uncomfortable when it comes close to religion (2000).

What struck me most in this interview was how this Aurovilian remembered contact with the Mother in the most matter-of-fact way. This stands at odds with the testimonials I heard in private and public from many people, who highlighted the singularity of their moments with her, whether such moments were many or few. Even so much as one glance from the Mother was often expressed as life transforming.

I had the sense on many occasions that having had any sort of contact with the Mother conferred upon one a privileged status. At the very least it seemed to
allow one to command a certain audience as one became the storyteller of past experiences. During 2001 Savitri Bhavan in Auroville organized a series entitled, "Remembering Mother," that consisted of a panel of presenters who spoke about their contact with the Mother when she was alive. I attended only the first in the series. The event, which took place under a peaceful grove of trees, was well attended, well amplified, and was recorded for posterity. The spectators, who came from Auroville and the greater Ashram community in Pondicherry, sat on the ground and in chairs. The speakers, also hailing from both Auroville and the Ashram, sat in a line of chairs at the front. Most of the speakers narrated specific anecdotes.

No one expressed the matter-of-fact perspective of the Aurovilian cited earlier. In contrast, the speakers emphasized the momentous and transformative dimensions of their interactions with the Mother, with statements such as "In her presence you were carried into another world." I remember that one of the challenges in coordinating amongst the storytellers was to confine some of them to a reasonable time limit. Given the quiet, liturgical atmosphere of the event, it was apparently hard to cut off any of the speakers, who by virtue of being invited onto the panel were invested with considerable narrative authority. I remember one woman in particular who augmented the religious, other-worldly nature of the event's contemplation by speaking in a hushed, breathy tone that created the
impression that what she was talking about was something so holy that it was almost ineffable. In speaking with several Aurovilians afterwards, many expressed distaste at what they considered pretense. No matter what the intentions of the organizers might have been, it was clear that the event was viewed by at least some spectators as not only the staging of collective memory, but also, and more significantly, as a platform for some speakers to foster and/or reaffirm a public image based upon spiritual prestige.

The very fact that the Remembering Mother series happened and was well-attended attests to the wider social context in which direct physical contact with Mother is something cherished and respected. There is little doubt, however, that there was also much sincere emotion expressed that day; the MC and organizer of the event was moved to tears, as were some members of the audience. This wave of affect underscored the importance that many people place upon either their memories, or in the case of those who never met her personally, their need to create concrete images of what physical contact with the Mother would have been like.

Seeing the Mother as very much human, as in the case of the matter-of-fact informant, means different things to different people. Not everyone is nonchalant. For some, Mother the human being can take on epic, mythological dimensions. The following is an excerpt from an interview with an Aurovilian whose primary
activity in the community is to serve as a tour guide and mentor for students and tourists to the community:

S.P.: How do you talk about Mother to groups of visitors when you show them around?

SAM: I say, “Do you know that when Mother was a 13-year old girl she jumped across the room 35 feet on her birthday? And that’s a longer jump than anybody has done at the Olympic Games. She did it because she had angels lift her across on their shoulders. She did it in front of her girlfriends.” So I tell them stories like that. And I tell them that if you want to buy a book, buy a book about Mother’s life, because she was a fascinating person. She was born with that in her, whereas Sri Aurobindo discovered his. I am not afraid to tell them stories like that, because I know they are true. I love her because she was an amazing person. But I like to make jokes too. Like when we went around and introduced ourselves, when it came to me I said, “Hi, I am --- and I met Mother 3,300 years ago in Egypt!” I don’t feel that the gods get mad at me if I make a joke. I don’t think they think I am being flippant about it. You can be light about it. You don’t have to constantly be so deadly serious about Mother and Sri Aurobindo (2001).

Emphasizing the Mother’s human qualities can still mean taking a lot on faith. It is interesting to note, however, that this belief in the miraculous does not for everyone go hand in hand with the kind of solemnity and sanctimoniousness of the Remembering Mother event. This Aurovilian expresses all at once both the faith of a devotee and the deadpan humor one might expect from a rational skeptic. Thus, followers of the Mother may see her in ways that are not logically consistent, although they may not experience their perceptions as contradictory.
Other Aurovilians, on the other hand, do express their experience of Mother in problematic terms. For example, when I asked a young Australian woman how she saw her relationship with the Mother, she told me:

LISA: I feel no conflict with what she or Sri Aurobindo were speaking about, but in terms of my relationship, to be honest it is something that I really struggle with. I have some idea that I should feel a certain type of relationship. I should be able to look at a picture of Mother and have a certain feeling, you know a sense of love and appreciation and gratitude – it feels like something I really have to work on. I wish it was different. Sometimes in Auroville there is this atmosphere weighing down. One of the messages is that people should be here because they feel a true kind of relationship – a direct relationship with Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It is not something that is ever really explicitly said, but is definitely there (2001).

This informant raises the issue of the social pressures that sanction particular perceptions of the Mother over others. The question is how such versions of the appropriate relationship become hegemonic even when they are not spoken of explicitly. Certainly events such as Remembering Mother enter into the category of dominant discourses, as do the recordings of the Mother's voice played during group meditations or the numerous photographs of her that can be found all over Auroville. These performances and displays create an atmosphere of respect, the effect of which is to render mute the voices of those who might openly admit that their relationship with the Mother is mundane, ambivalent, or even irreverent. Making reference to the Mother lands one squarely in the realm of the sacred, which can be dangerous territory.

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In the case of Auroville, it is not the sacred power itself which is the
danger, but the potential for unfavorable social ramifications. While to publicly
flout the culture of reverence might not meet with official, institutional sanctions,
Auroville is a very small society and one in which face-to-face interactions can
have greater implications for one’s life than group processes. People are often
careful about what they say openly for fear that someone who wields some power
on a committee or with the Indian government might take a dislike to them and
withhold cooperation in the future. This is especially the case for Newcomers, who
must successfully navigate a probation period of two years before full acceptance as
residents. As it is understood that one should have an interest in the teachings of
the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in order to live in Auroville, several Newcomers I
met admitted being very careful to give the impression of the “correct” attitude with
respect to Auroville’s founding figures.

For example, even in the context of an anonymous interview, it would be
unlikely to hear a Newcomer openly disavow the Mother in the way that this
Aurovilian of European descent who has lived most of his life in Auroville did:

S.P.: Do you consider Mother a saint?

FRANK: No, not at all. And I don’t see myself as a devotee. Actually,
these days I’ve stopped even trying to relate my life to what Mother said.
There is so much I doubt now, and some things are just too outrageous. The
thing is that I’ve been through so many things at this point that I’m basically
just living my life and all that. I live here but I’m not interested in Mother
or anything else (2000).
This feeling of disillusionment over the gap between Auroville’s ideals and its reality is not uncommon in Auroville, although like other ambivalences it is not something that people tend to express openly (see Chapter 7). That disappointment about the community’s progress should manifest simultaneously as doubt about the Mother does not seem surprising. In the case of this informant, the issue is whether the very proposition set forth for Auroville by the Mother might be actually “outrageous.” For other Aurovilians, however, frustration stems more from perceptions about the limited capacity of present day human beings to live up to the task Mother put to them.

The question naturally arises as to why someone so despairing of the community’s proposal and development continues to live there. In the case at hand, having grown up in Auroville with the limited education available there during its early years, the person felt that options for doing other things, even with the possibilities open to someone with a European passport, were limited. There are other people, who while they did not grow up in Auroville have invested the better part of their working lives there, who share this informant’s perception of being “stuck” in the place.

On the other hand, I know Aurovilians who have little interest in Mother and Sri Aurobindo or the Auroville project per se, yet who choose to live in Auroville because they find it a pleasant place to be. Thus, while highlighting the
importance of the Mother for Auroville, it is important to acknowledge that this
does not mean that she is a compelling figure in the private lives of all who are in
some way participating in the events that she set in motion.

Mother the Divine

In the Ashram it was Sri Aurobindo who first proclaimed the Mother to be
an embodiment of the universal divine mother. Explaining to his disciples, some of
whom were at first reluctant to accept her, that she was his force (*shakti*), he
proclaimed that he and she were but two entities of one and the same reality and
that their coming together had been necessary for the transformation that they were
to bring about. Sri Aurobindo described the Mother in all her attributes of wisdom,
strength, harmony, and perfection, aligning her with the Hindu divine feminine
principles of Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati (1972a: 17-
35). Both he and the Mother asserted, however, that at the highest levels, gender
categories do not apply. Even the Vedas speak of *purusha* (masculine, initiator of
creation) and *prakriti* (feminine, dynamic executor of creation) as one and the same
consciousness.

Because Sri Aurobindo himself asserted that Mother embodied divine
principles, naturally many of his followers do as well. Yet for those who emphasize
Mother’s beyond-human identity, there are many ways of perceiving and expressing
her transcendence. I use the term “divine” to designate such an orientation towards Mother only for lack of a better word. Divinity means different things to different people and is often cast in ambiguous terms. In the following interview excerpt, my informant, a middle-aged French woman who has lived in Auroville from the early days, draws attention to the liminal status of an avatar figure:

S.P.: Who is Mother?

MICHELLE: She and Sri Aurobindo are beings who have been conscious of the whole universe. It’s like they have taken the whole into their consciousness.

S.P.: Are they human beings?

MICHELLE: No, of course they were more than human beings, but they were also human beings. I know that they understand, not only my own little troubles, but all the contradictions in life. So it’s kind of an immense relief. It doesn’t mean that I find solutions, or that they give me solutions. But if I get closer to them, if I understand better, if I develop more, out of all these contradictions some light would start to come (2001).

This devotee emphasizes the double-identity of Mother as being of flesh and blood, and yet not at all confined by this reality. In this doubleness, the Mother is somewhat like Jesus Christ is for his followers, since he is both a “man” and a “son-of-God.” In Schechner’s terms (1985), the Mother is both not human, but at the same time, she is not not human.

Although she was not a Hindu, and did not advocate Hindu practices per se, there is much in the context that surrounds her and in the way that she is perceived by even Western devotees that bears the stamp of Hinduism. In Hinduism, human
beings can take on the roles of divine entities, as actors and dancers do. But
divine forces can also take on the roles of human beings as with several of Vishnu’s
avatars. Although dealing with a very different situation, Schechner’s conclusions
about the boy-actors who play Rama in the month-long Ramlila of Benares, are
illustrative:

In the Hindu context the divine is not a simple thing to define, nor is it
radically separable from ordinary human existence. As with so much else in
Indian culture, the divine exists as a palimpsest: it is there in ordinary life, it
manifests itself in incarnations and less forceful presences such as rishis,
sadhus, devout individuals; and it is present in an essential, highly refined
substance as the Ramlila murtis who are, and represent, at the same time
what they are presumed to be (187).

Both human and divine natures are open ended; one identity does not preclude the
other.

In this situation, divinity is not so much a static essence, as it is a process of
becoming. As Cutler points out, “In such a world there is no insurmountable
separation between the divine and the mundane” (1986: 165). This allows, among
other things, for the embodiment of divinity, which is one of the central features of
Hinduism as practiced throughout India and across all levels of society. And since
both the divine and the devotee are embodied human beings, a personal relationship
between them is possible.

5 For different takes on the concrete dimensions of divinity as experienced
throughout India, see the edited volume of Waghorne and Cutler 1986.
This sharing of the divine and the human is what makes the Mother so appealing to many of her followers. On the one hand, her transcendent essence is inspiring. On the other, her life as a human being imbues her with an intimate understanding of the human condition. Her heightened empathy allows devotees to feel a true emotional and spiritual intimacy with her. The Mother’s miraculous ability for understanding was underscored to me again and again. For example, a European man who joined Auroville at its inception, recounted his first experience of an audience with Mother in the early 60s as follows:

PETER: I had prepared smart questions, for I had studied philosophy and I thought I was very intellectual and a very advanced specimen. I went into her room. Her chair was strangely placed so that when you walked in the room, at first it seemed empty. Then you heard the voice, “Yes?” You turned around and she was sitting there. She asked, “You wanted to talk or you wanted to be quiet?” I couldn’t really talk at the moment. And she looked at me and took me on a trip. The image imprinted on my mind was that of, like in chemistry you have these test tubes. What I saw was a huge test tube lit up from inside, with a golden outline. Right at the bottom was a purple drop. She said, “This is what you are now, and this is all you can become if you follow your path.” There was such a certainty, like the future and everything was laid out before you. When she looked – and afterwards she became more personal – it was with a feeling of being totally understood. There was not a niche, not a corner, not a crevice inside you that you didn’t want her to see, or you wanted to hide or you felt embarrassed about. It was all totally lit up. Such a relief it was, that feeling of being fully and totally understood! And I knew somehow that I was going to live my life in service to her (2000).

For this person, the Mother’s understanding was nothing short of omniscience. Her gaze, characterized by another informant as “a bolt of lightning,” encompassed everything and thereby allowed reality to be seen for what it is. It was both
revelatory and transformative. What is interesting is that it became the basis for entering into a relationship based upon reciprocity. The devotee at the end of the statement reports that he knew from that moment on that he would offer his life to the Mother. What did this mean for him? He later explained that for him it had meant working in his own limited capacities towards furthering the vision that the Mother had for the future of humanity. In other words, the Mother’s mandates became his. This did not imply a worshipful attitude, however. The same Aurovilian went on to explain that he saw his own path as one consisting of work, and not of sentiments and acts of devotion.

**A Mother for Worship**

There are certainly those for whom the Mother’s divine qualities elicit an orientation of worship. Responses assume a wide variety of forms, from offerings of flowers and incense, to bowing down before pictures. Such practices have their roots in typical Hindu practices of demonstrating *bhakti* (devotion) and partaking of *prasad* (offerings flowers and food to the gods), but are practiced regularly by all kinds of Aurovilians, although by no means all or most. When I asked people why they chose to express their sentiments in these particular ways, their responses were sometimes vague. A young North Indian woman related this to me in an interview:

S.P.: Why do you bow down and touch your forehead to the Samadhi [Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s tomb] in the way that you say you do?
SUKANYA: I don’t really know. I haven’t really thought about it. I guess it’s just like you feel close to her and Sri Aurobindo doing it like that, even though I know that one should feel close to them anywhere. Besides, going down like that, it’s what everyone else does there at the Samadhi so I just picked it up (2000).

However one puts it, these are the gestures offered to the gods by those who worship them.

One of the challenges in deciphering ritual activities and symbols is that people often are unable to articulate why they do what they do.6 Here the informant provides part of the answer herself in stating that bowing down is a copied behavior. The selective appropriation of particular Indian practices on the part of Western Aurovilians includes the adoption of “techniques of the body.”7 These techniques range from a basis in practical needs (such as learning to use water rather than toilet paper, or how to cut certain fruits and vegetables found only in South India), to mandates of local custom (such as sitting on the floor or handing people money only with the right hand), to more abstract concerns (such as kneeling and placing one’s forehead against the cool marble of the tomb of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo).

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6 In Turner’s classic study of Ndembu ritual, he argues that symbols are “shaped under the influence of unconscious motivations” and gives examples of symbolic behavior “for which the Ndembu themselves can give no satisfactory interpretation” (1967: 33).
7 Mauss (1950) made the claim that habits and corporeal tactics are “techniques of the body” which constitute all the “cultural arts” of having a body and moving through the world in it.
Kinesthetics relate to naturalized cultural and cosmological orientations. More often than not, those who are culturally disposed to move in certain ways from any early age are not fully conscious of these connections. In the case of those who as adults elect to imitate bodily routines, however, a level of agency is exercised. That agency is not necessarily accompanied by information about the history or wider social context in which such practices originate. Instead rituals and gestures are inserted into pre-existing, unrelated meanings or collages of images, ideas and symbols sampled selectively from an array of cultural elements, like meals eaten at some kind of global smorgasbord. For example, a young woman who is a Newcomer to Auroville from Germany told me this:

S.P.: Why do you place flowers everyday at the picture of Mother in your bedroom?

KLARA: Well, my amma [the Tamil woman who cleans the informant’s house] was putting them there and I thought it was such a beautiful thing to do. You know, these Indian people have so many beautiful things that they...

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8 The study of the body and its movement received little attention from the academic disciplines for a long time, with the exception of pioneers such as Mauss (1950) and Birdwhistell (1970). Later some heavyweight theorists became interested in seeing the body as culturally, socially, and historically constructed (Bourdieu 1977; Butler 1993; Foucault 1978, 1979). Nevertheless, scholars, particularly those interested in dance, have had to fight to have movement treated as anything more than artistic, idiosyncratic, or cultural entertainment (Royce 1980: 38). The problem is basically that “many cultural observers and researchers ignore the body and its trappings, seeing them as irrelevant trappings for the mind” (Novack 1990: 7). In the past ten years, many dance scholars have made significant contributions towards counterposing this tendency, calling attention to bodily practices as modes of culture and consciousness (Buckland 2002; Browning 1995; Daniel 1995).
do spontaneously. I thought it was a nice way of showing one’s feelings. And since India is now my home, I thought it would be nice to do this myself (2000).

Here the ritual act of laying flowers at the photo operates on different levels, evidence of the multivalent nature of ritual gestures and symbols. Although it is in a more obvious sense a means of honoring the Mother and her message, on a more personal level it is a sign of the Aurovilian’s love affair with particular aspects of local Indian culture. She does not seem to possess much knowledge about these rituals she admires, as judging by her attributing them to spontaneous expression, as opposed to customary patterns. Indeed, she assumes that the act entails “feelings” on the part of the doer, rather than consider that the amma might have been simply following culturally prescribed, routine behaviors. At any rate, the specifics are not of great importance as the adoption of “India” as “home” both inspires the informant and issues her the mandate to appropriate the practices she finds of interest on her own terms. Thus, the act of worship is about far more than the display of devotion.

That the Tamil worker was placing flowers is not surprising, as the Mother is a respected figure. Increasingly, those coming to both Auroville and the Ashram to express devotion are not the foreigners and educated North Indians who for decades comprised the majority of visitors, but lower caste, class, and rural people from throughout Tamil Nadu. It would seem that the Mother has become a new
destination on the traditional pilgrimage circuit. She has taken a place in the
collection of local goddesses. This view is reinforced by the appearance of
images of the Mother and traditional bhajan (devotional song) cassette tapes in
honor of “Annai” (the literary, respectful Tamil word meaning “mother”), both sold
at stalls outside temples all over Tamil Nadu (see Figure 30).

Goddesses in India appear in an immense number of forms and characteristics, and
are particularly prolific throughout the states of Orissa and Tamil Nadu (Foulston
2002: 18). Scholars in recent years have increasingly paid attention to these figures
(Emdl 1993; Kurtz 1992; Obeyesekere 1984; Pintchman 2001; Preston 1982,
1985b; Sax 1991). On one hand, this interest has been motivated out of a desire to
rectify past ignorance of the role of women in society and concepts of the divine
feminine. On the other, academics on South Asia have sought to understand the full
range of Hinduism. This has meant expanding the focus from texts and philosophy
to everyday, popular practices. Such scholarship has illustrated to an even greater
degree the sheer variety of concepts and symbols that are the fabric of Hindu life. It
also points to the ways in which pan-Indian abstract concepts are in dialogue with
local and regional forms of worship. The influential scholar, David Kinsley, asserts
that the goddess, whether in her metaphysical, abstract dimension of shakti, or in

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9 For an examination of many of the aspects in which people from all over the
South Asia region live their day to day lives, see the edited volume Mines and
Lamb 2002.
Figure 30: Advertisement outside the central Ganesh temple in Pondicherry for cassette of devotional songs about the Mother by the karnatic vocalist, M. Balamuralikrishna. Such images of the Mother, unauthorized by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, can be found throughout Tamil Nadu.
Photograph by Shanti Pillai
one of her innumerable embodiments, cannot be reduced to any single feminine principle, and instead demonstrates a multiplicity of ideas and issues that are central in Hinduism:

[T]he great variety of goddesses allows one to find in their mythology and worship expressions of almost every important Hindu theme. In short, a study of Hindu goddesses is not so much a study of one aspect of the Hindu tradition as it is a study of the Hindu tradition itself. (1986: 4).

From one perspective, the deification of the Mother on the part of certain classes of Tamilians is not so surprising. Goddess temples are widespread in the area and often host low-caste clientele. Secondly, I have observed firsthand that local temples tend to go in and out of style, as stories about miracles accrue or social conditions change. Yet if one considers that deities are not usually white women, the question becomes different entirely! To say that the Mother attests to the broad scope and flexibility of Hinduism would seem axiomatic, as Hinduism's ability to incorporate a wide array of new elements is almost a truism. Although outside the scope of this present project, there lies an interesting and productive avenue of future research in examining how Mother's popularity has increased amongst a new population, the meaning attributed to her by these devotees, and how they perceive her in relation to other goddesses.10

10 As Richard Schechner pointed out to me, Mother's acceptance by the local population echoes the unusual kind of embrace that the Indian public has extended, at times more warmly than others, to Congress Party leader, Sonia Gandhi. Speaking very generally, this would seem to suggest a longer trajectory of aligning...
The introduction of the Mother into structures of feeling and meaning that operate outside of the Ashram and Auroville’s institutional interpretations of her highlights the open ended nature of icons. It also shines light on the efforts made by organizations that surround such figures to promote and police particular versions of their spiritual identities and legacies. I was reminded of this one afternoon as I chatted at the snack bar at the Auroville Visitors’ Center with some visitors, who had come to spend an afternoon in Auroville from a small town just to the south. Judging from their appearance and the bio-data they offered, the visitors, who were all related, appeared to be new arrivals to India’s expanding middle class, a class that is hungry for new entertainments and tourist travel. Three years ago an older man in the family had encountered the teachings of one Karma Yogi, an educated Tamil man who had lived many years in the Ashram and who of late has taken to disseminating his own version of the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo throughout Tamil Nadu. His publications and cassette tapes, all in the Tamil language, are not produced by the Ashram, although I have seen them sold in and around that part of Pondicherry. The older gentleman informed me that for the past two years he had been offering flowers to the Mother to very good effect.

identity with behavior, as opposed to origin. In other words, if a person “behaves Indian,” meaning that she performs certain practices or conforms to socially sanctioned standards of conduct, then a person “is Indian.”
I inquired what he meant and he related that he had come to learn that the Mother had indicated particular flowers for obtaining particular kinds of blessings. After following the appropriate prescriptions and making daily offerings to a photo of the Mother that he had placed alongside the other deities on his puja table, the man’s son-in-law had obtained a good job, the marriage of his second daughter had been fixed, and his wife had found some relief from an ailment that had long plagued her. In gratitude and also out of a desire to have some more intimate contact with the Mother, the family had visited the Samadhi, the place where both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are interred in the courtyard of the main Ashram building. They then proceeded to Auroville in the afternoon, as they were curious to see the “Mother’s Temple” that an acquaintance back home had described.

The episode was fascinating to me, as I was well aware of the Mother’s categorization of flowers, but had never heard of such an interpretation of its significance. From my childhood I had known that the Mother had spoken at length about the spiritual meaning of each flower, meaning that particular blossoms represent and embody specific aspects of higher levels of consciousness. For example, to one of my favorite flowers for its smell, frangipani, the Mother had given the name “Psychological Perfection.” The point was not that one might obtain such qualities through smelling or handling the flowers, and much less about using them in worship for obtaining material gain. It was more about the belief that
the Divine Consciousness expressed its infinite aspects in innumerable ways, especially through instances of extreme beauty in creation. The flowers embodied that expression and were also a visual metaphor for a particular attribute of the divine that humans, in their ongoing efforts to achieve perfection, could aspire to embody.

Most of the Aurovilians to whom I mentioned this story were amused, astonished, or disgusted by such an unheard of and, to some, bastardized interpretation of the Mother. One Dutch Aurovilian responded as follows:

THOMAS: Well, you know, these Tamil people can only understand things on their own terms. Their mental development is such that it's all about gods and goddesses for them and how they can get this or that to make their lives a little easier. No matter what kinds of rules we put in place, Auroville is going to continue to invite such visitors who come here with these kinds of ideas and reasons. Although I don’t have a quarrel with bhakti (even though I don’t feel it that way myself), this that you’re talking about, it’s precisely the kind of religious stuff that Mother and Sri Aurobindo wanted to toss out (2000)!

This response speaks to a generalized notion that certain versions of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and their philosophy are correct, while others are not only off the mark, but actually contradict the true essence of the teachings. In their waywardness, such false interpretations are all but proof of the need to elevate human consciousness in the ways that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother talked about.

In such statements, however, it is the authority of the speaker that is underscored, albeit not explicitly. The speaker assumes that he has access to the
true meaning of the teachings, almost as if he himself is not also making an
interpretation. In the case at hand, discrediting certain interpretations is
accomplished through a racialized logic that flattens any diversity of viewpoint
amongst Tamil people and relegates all their spiritual impulses to the anachronistic
realm of satisfying simplistic desires. It does not occur to the speaker that the
incorporation of the Mother into the religious experience of the people in question
is testimony to a highly complex play between ambiguity and specificity, one of the
hallmarks of all levels of Hindu practice and a quality that dances circles around
more Westernized dichotomies of right-and wrong, inside and outside, spiritual and
mundane. More significantly, in my view, the speaker does not acknowledge that
the seemingly more material desires expressed by the Tamil visitors might have
something to do with the difficult social and economic conditions in which they
have to live, and not with some innate, bio-spiritual inability to harbor higher
aspirations.

*Of Surprises*

The particular use of the flowers fits in with the wider framework of belief
in miracles and a faith in the divine’s capacity for intervention in human affairs.
Stories of miracles captivate believers as tantalizing testimony of the divine’s
invisible proximity. As for me, although I have always had a passion for such tales,
and India is full of these accounts, I have never placed much importance on miracles, as far as seeking to substantiate my own beliefs with them, or yearning to witness them with my own eyes. Yet in as much as I have always felt committed to the idea that the human mind, while a brilliant instrument in many regards, is highly limited in its powers of understanding even when exquisitely trained, I have always taken pleasure in considering events and circumstances which render themselves completely inexplicable by any mental logic. For me puzzling surprises, whether pleasant or very difficult, are proof that reality little resembles the simple or elaborate constructions I make of it in my head. They are also reminders that I do not exactly control my own destiny, at least not in any intellectual sort of way, a fact that I have always taken comfort in. Thus, I have always sought guidance for my own life in my efforts to read whatever serendipitous signs crossed my path.

Oddly to me, Mother emerged in different little ways, from the moment I began to consider writing my dissertation about Auroville. In fact, if asked what my own perception of her is, I would say that she has become for me a kind of humorous trickster figure, who, despite my rational protestations, likes to remind me of her presence. She first popped up in the first conversation I had about this project with my dissertation advisor, Richard Schechner, who unbeknownst to me before that time, had visited Auroville in the early 70s and, of greater surprise, had had a darshan with the Mother herself. The coincidence was actually one of the
main reasons that I decided to pursue this study. Shortly thereafter, I wrote a paper on Auroville in a course on transnationalism and culture, taught by May Joseph, at that time professor at NYU’s Performance Studies Department. To my surprise again, I discovered that she had read many of the Mother’s works and professed a long-time admiration for her.

Most recently, Mother made yet another appearance, perfectly timed. During the first week of my sitting to write this chapter, a small envelope arrived for me from India. It bore the handwriting of a man I called my “Uncle,” who was a long-time family friend and head of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Reception office that receives visitors (he has since passed away). Inside was a small laminated card with a photograph of the Mother on the one side, and on the other the caption, “21 February 2003: 125th Birth Anniversary of the Mother.” I had received similar images of the Mother over the years from this man, usually on the occasion of my birthday, but I had never given them much thought. But by virtue of coinciding with this chapter, this image was somehow different to me.

I mention this here to highlight what I have been stressing, namely the two-way relationship that many experience with the Mother. From my end, the relationship is dependent upon my electing to read events in specific ways that link my everyday life to a figure who is both absent and present. That absent figure must take up the task of appearing in whatever shape or form. These vehicles for
manifesting presence are what I will turn to now in relation to the Mother in Auroville.

The Mother's Present Manifestations

I will argue that an important aspect of the Mother's nature is her ability to continue to manifest in concrete ways since her death in 1972. It is the extension of her divine charisma beyond the limits of her physical body that keeps Auroville dynamic. On the part of many, although by no means all Aurovilians, there is a sense that the Mother is very much present in Auroville. This is expressed in a variety of ways, from statements such as “Mother put her force in this place,” or “I know that Mother is watching and guiding us,” to the complex interactions that people have with written texts, photographs, and places. Images and spaces are far more than representations of Mother and her power, or reminders of what she stood for. They become actual embodiments of her conscious force, in as much as they allow Aurovilians to engage with her in personalized relationships of reciprocity. Mother’s metaphysical luminescence filters down into personified, concrete objects of cosmological import. Although many Aurovilians believe that the Mother’s force is to be found everywhere, as it is the very dynamism upon which all reality is based, they also participate in a material culture in which the Absolute concentrates in specific entities and instances that are contained in both space and time, a mode
of viewing embodiment that is logically consistent with the ideas of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother about the descent of pure consciousness into various dimensions of existence, including the physical.

Through these forms of presence, the Mother continues to be a social actor, which, as argued by Paden, is a prerequisite of divinity:

A god is a god of someone or to someone. Only in the eyes of a religious person can a god be a god as such. A god is a category of social, interactive, behavior, experienced in a way that is analogous to the experience of other selves. With gods one receives, gives, follows, loves, imitates, communes, negotiates, contests, entrusts. A god is a subject to us as objects and an object to us as subjects. We address it, or it can address us (1994: 124).

Since they allow for an active relationship, the Mother’s manifestations are not symbols in the sense that Geertz indicates, as something that stores meaning or “sums up” and dramatizes what is known (1973: 126-141). They are much more on the order of bodies that inhabit and interact with the world. At the same time, the Mother’s embodiments are symbols, in as much as they play a role in creating a sense of community; they stand as common points of reference around which Auroville’s disparate elements rally.

While there may be multiple emanations and metaphorical bodies that allow Mother and Aurovilians to address one another, there are two primary vehicles for close, intense interaction with Mother’s personified force: photographic images and the Matrimandir temple at the center of Auroville. Like everything else, Aurovilians interpret these entities in very different ways, imbuing them with
varying meanings and attributes and entering into different kinds of relationships with them, even as they reaffirm them as common points of reference. In addition, while construed by many as sacred, both photographs and especially Matrimandir are suspended in the mundane force field of the community’s political, economic and ideological power struggles, a reminder that if symbols have the power to draw communities together, they can also be caught in the currents that make community a fractious and tenuous operation from the outset.

Photographs

Photographs of Mother register on many levels. Whether treated as objects of worship or as visual reminders of Auroville’s aims, the Mother’s photographic visage is one very common way in which Aurovilians interact with her on a daily basis. For some people, these photographs take on the quality of the “cosmic implosion” Preston describes in relation to Hindu images generally (1985a: 27). As such, images of the Mother concentrate the entire cosmos into a contained space and time. The photo is both a part of the whole of reality, yet is at the same time in and of itself a full manifestation of that boundless reality. It is both a representation of the Mother, and on some level an embodiment of her.

As such, the relation that many Aurovilians have with such images relates to the Hindu concept and act of darshan. As defined by Eck, “The central act of
Hindu worship from the point of view of the lay person is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes..." (1985: 6). *Darshan* can take place with idols and images, as well as with living spiritual beings, such as *sadhus* (renunciates) or gurus. Conceptually this viewing is enmeshed within the Hindu construction of the material world as illusory, or in the case of Sri Aurobindo's teachings, as one of many different modes of existence. Among the many implications of either of these beliefs is that everyday perception is not an exhaustive source of knowledge about the world, for what we experience through the senses is either not as things are, or is revelatory of only a very partial piece of reality (O Flaherty 1984). Consequently, *darshan* is a special kind of seeing. It involves opening one's perception in such a way that through the material form of the divine image or guru, one can see and enter into contact with a transcendent substrate, which manifests a boundless reality. While *darshan* takes place at a certain moment in time, it does not begin and end with that moment. It is rather a process that continues to unfold even over years as blessings received bear fruit in the transformations in one's life.

*Darshan* implies a relationship; the achievement of heightened consciousness requires that both the giver (the divine) and the taker (the human viewer) present themselves to one another. It is the former's role to make possible an alteration of the viewer's mental state, while the latter must surrender herself to
the experience. If one thinks of the moment in terms of theatrical metaphors, the line between performer and spectator are blurred. In darshan, it is understood that the divine form and the human are both looking at one another; both entities are both subject and object. In the exchange that takes place through the eyes, the guru or image elevates the devotee who, in turn, endeavors to opens herself to what is given. It is the divine’s existence on the liminal border between the material and the transcendent that charges her form with the power to vault the devotee into the realm of formlessness.

A long-time French Aurovilian, who is reputed to have strict views with respect to the philosophy, articulated this principle with respect to his own relationship with photos of the Mother very clearly:

S.P.: The images of Mother that you have at home, what do they mean to you? What do you see in them?

MARC: The one I have in particular is one of Mother at the last stage of her life. I mean this life! [laughter] I can sense precisely this vastness, this vast consciousness that holds the entire universe and in which there is absolutely no judgement, and something that opens the depths and depths and heights and heights of continuous fields of new growth and experiences. This is what I feel. This is what I am attracted to. It is right there in the photograph in front of me. She is right in front of me (2001).

For this Aurovilian, the photo of the Mother serves as a conduit into another dimension beyond the one immediately perceived by the senses. The immediacy of the image being “right there” stands almost in contrast to the immense subtle expanse onto which it opens.
There is of course nothing in the image itself that would convey this without explanation to a viewer not accustomed to looking at images in such a way. As with all texts, these photographs are not endowed with intrinsic meaning (although some devotees might differ), but are instead understood through the social frameworks that situate them in relation to other ideas and activities of everyday life. The point seems particularly obvious given that many people who

11 The analysis of photographs and other visual images has incorporated two simultaneous currents. On the one hand, the more anthropological version has proceeded from the perspective of photography's "polysemous nature, lack of fixity and context dependent modes of making meaning" (Edwards 2001: 14). A classic example of the impulse to locate the meaning of images in their cultural context is Pinney’s (1997) examination of the history and development of portraiture in India. Poole’s (1997) analysis of the "visual economy" of photographs of the Andes and its people in relation to ideas about race is more dialogical, as social context and the image itself are seen as mutually creating and reinforcing. The other, parallel mode of analysis constitutes what W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) identifies as the "pictorial turn," in which the concern is to explore the visual force fields that attract people and make images into actors in the world. At issue is confronting the subjugation of the material world to the supreme governance of language. Here art history has found its corollary with efforts to make a claim for the performativity of ritual, rather than its linguistic referentiality (see Sperber 1975). This is in part a move to recapture the corporeality of the act of viewing. Buck-Morss’ (1995) treatise on the monumental work of Walter Benjamin does much towards theorizing this in terms of the embodiment of aesthetics as a mode of perception based on feeling. This model of the embodied viewer (as opposed to one who is disinterested) inspires Morgan’s (1998) ethnography of religious images, in which he explores how Christians in the United States interact directly with images of Christ in efforts to relieve suffering. My own examination of the Mother’s images combines elements of both of these currents. On the one hand, I am interested in the relationship that such photographs have to social politics in Auroville and larger Indian cultural ideas about the viewing of religious images. On the other, I explore how these images are actors in everyday life and the ways in which specifically situated people feel and react in looking at them.
know nothing of the Mother might react with puzzlement, amusement or even aversion to pictures of what might seem merely an old woman. One of my Aurovilian informants even joked with me once as he described his first audience with the Mother in the early 70s, “You’ve seen these photos of her in this weird dress and you know that at the end of her life, Mother didn’t look like much!”

I was reminded of this during 2002 when I served as faculty member in a study abroad program that brings college students from the United States to Auroville. Although the focus of the program was on environmental and social sustainability, during the several weeks of the program students were naturally exposed to Sri Aurobindo’s teachings and the practice of reverence for the Mother. On October 31 the students organized a Halloween party amongst themselves, decorating the little classroom we used regularly as a haunted house, sharing candies, and telling ghost stories. When I passed by the area the following day they had already dismantled the remains of the previous evening’s festivities with one exception: someone had relocated a large image of the Mother’s eyes that had been hanging in another part of the guesthouse, hanging it over the chalkboard where it gazed out spookily (see Figure 31). The image, which has appeared around Auroville and Pondicherry in recent years, is a cutout and magnified section of a portrait of the Mother’s face. The kids had obviously tapped into the idea of Mother as the unseen seer of all things and reconfigured it for the evening to fit into
Figure 31: The Mother’s eyes. This image, which has been mass-produced in this fashion, is actually a crop of the 1964 photo in Figure 26. Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
popular American seasonal mythologies of ghosts and other invisible presences. It also appealed to some of them as a variation on the “Big Brother” character of Orwellian fame. In fact, someone coined the term “Big Mother” during the course of the semester. Not wanting to in any way imply that the students needed to see the image as sacred, yet at the same time apprehensive about perhaps mildly offending the woman who ran the facility, I quietly resituated the image to its usual location. I was fully prepared to explain to the students why I had done what I did, but in the bustle of the semester, it never came up. Moreover, the students, who were accustomed to leaving communal areas cluttered and having others clean up after them, never noticed or asked.

When I recounted the story some time later to a former resident of Auroville, who now lives in the United States, she responded, “They just don’t get the idea of ‘darshan,’ do they?” With this she referred not only to the significance of the photograph in its current location, but also the context in which the image had been originally created. The Mother regularly gave *darshan* on designated days of the year close up until the time she died. For many years she would receive people privately in her room, or on more public occasions would sit in a special chair to receive the line of visitors. Later she would appear on the balcony of the main Ashram building, while devotees, who grew in number each year, would gather on the clean street below. Interestingly, one of the most widely seen images
of the Mother is a photograph taken on one such occasion and shows her leaning on the balcony and gazing below (see Figure 32). This photo documents one of the later occasions of darshan, configuring the moment as a historical event. The exchange that takes place between the divine image and the viewer, however, exists outside of chronological time. The essential meaning of the moment is thus lost in looking at the photograph as a representation. The creation of such an image opens up the possibility for endless re-stagings of the event that are, at some level, as immediate as the originating darshan itself was. Remembering that photographs are interpreted by many people as embodiments of the Mother’s power or, at least, apertures into her consciousness, viewing images such as this one constitutes a moment of darshan.

My students that day certainly had no idea of any of this, and even if they had, I certainly would not have censored them. In the rebellious wisdom of youth, what I think they were poking fun at was less the personal sacred relationships that devotees established with Mother, and more the general sense of stifling religiosity that the constant presence of pictures of this woman might impose on some people. This is an opinion with which many Aurovilians seem to agree. On one occasion I was surprised when a French Aurovilian, whom I had wrongly assumed held more dogmatic views, responded in this way when I asked what he thought of the public display of pictures of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo:
Figure 32: The Mother giving *darshan* on May 4, 1967. She regarded this particular date as special in occult terms because of its unusual numerical sequence; written following the standard Indian and European convention of month first, the date reads as 4-5-67. Photo by Arup Mitra
Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram
ANDRE: I don’t like so much all these photos everywhere. For me it’s something that can become very artificial. They [Mother and Sri Aurobindo] are far beyond all these photographs [...] Even when I think about Mother, I don’t like to project her image in my mind. She is much more than this. So, to put all these photos everywhere is a kind of reduction of what they are and what they represent. And for me I find it sometimes a bit too religious. You know, that one should feel very reverent like you are living always in a church. And then people can feel like they are priests because they are keeping a photo to show. I don’t like all these kinds of religious activities (2001).

For this Aurovilian the photographs are not about providing an opportunity for communion with larger forces; their primary role in public places is to promote an attitude of worship. Moreover, they allow whoever decides to hang the image to align their activities, at least visually, with the Mother and her ideas.

As there are no official policies in the community about the display of images, there is no single reason why they are so ubiquitous. Spiritual aspirations aside, perhaps one of the other motivations for keeping photos in public places is to create the feeling that Aurovilians share a common orientation, namely that they have come to Auroville in order to fulfill the Mother’s dream. In the promotion of a sense of community, the Mother’s picture becomes a symbol for the unified direction and harmonious cooperation upon which the official version of what it means to be an Aurovilian is based. Other images enter into this category of symbols mobilized in the formulation of a communal identity, including reprints of brief quotations written in the Mother’s own handwriting and photographs of flowers associated with Mother’s system of classification. Through the visual
sharing of these images, Aurovilians affirm to outsiders who they are to one another, declaring what many of them consider the core of their identity, their spiritual and philosophical orientation.

A friend of mine, an educated South Indian who had lived in Europe prior to settling in Auroville, had another theory. While somewhat conspiratorial in its overtones, like many of his observations, it was certainly thought provoking. He asserted that there were far more pictures of the Mother around than of Sri Aurobindo, and that that was explained largely by the fact that the Mother, being French, had the greater appeal for the European Aurovilians. In particular, the French, long-associated rightly or wrongly in the minds of many in the community with a more doctrinaire view, were invested in promoting her. I cannot say that I ever heard anything to suggest that nationalistic chauvinism motivated the public display of the Mother’s image, or any subtle promotion of her over Sri Aurobindo. Yet the informant’s comments interested me in as much as they revealed a perception that Auroville’s icons could signify for some residents a behind-the-scenes complicated social situation that belies Auroville’s ideal identity of universality.
Another important symbol, and one which like the photographs acts as a kind of living agent of the Mother and her vision, is Matrimandir, the monumental temple at the center of Auroville that has been under construction since 1971. Matrimandir is an impressive structure and one that automatically inspires awe on the part of any viewer who approaches (see Figures 10 and 33). It appears as if out of nowhere, looking nothing like any structure in the area. It is, in fact, one of the most post-modern and technologically sophisticated buildings in all of India.

Inspiration for the design of the structure came from the Mother herself, who saw its design in detail in a series of visions. Today it stands as a towering, spherical-shaped building, covered by a large, golden, concave discs. The inside is still largely concrete and steel-reinforcements, with only the main chamber anywhere near completion. The main entrance, called “Kali” after the Hindu goddess who embodies the feminine principle in her fearsome, evil-destroying form, stretches out long from the building’s interior, like the tongue of its namesake. After crossing through the great portal, one climbs a sloped ramp, which winds up to the focal point of the design, an inner meditation chamber. This round, womb-like room, carpeted in white and walled in white marble, is lit by a sky light set in a vaulted ceiling. Meditators sit on white cushions arranged in a circle, facing the center where a large, spherical crystal sits supported by a golden, four-sided base in the
Figure 33: Matrimandir under construction in the early 90s
Photo purchased at Auroville Visitors’ Center
Photographer unknown
shape of Sri Aurobindo's symbol. The crystal, cut and polished in Germany and among the largest in the world, refracts an ethereal light, which fills the room with a gentle hue. Everything is silent and pleasantly cool, thanks to a sophisticated air cooling system. I have been told by some people that when the building is complete the passage leading to this chamber will represent a kind of birth canal to deliver the visitor from the womb of the Divine and out into the New World. There will also be additional meditation areas. Within the structure, but on a different level from the main chamber, are a series of smaller rooms which face the center.

Matrimandir is the perfect example of sacred architecture's location between the manifesting of divine power on the one hand, and the interplay of political and economic forces on the other. The aesthetics of the site are governed largely by questions of spiritual meaning and the desire to give form to divine transcendence. The design of the building is based upon visions for it that the Mother began having in 1965, when she began to speak about Auroville in detail for the first time (see AV Press n.d.: 15-16). At the same time, every step of Matrimandir's construction has been a subject of debate buffeted by political forces. Moreover, decisions about its design have been modified, curtailed, or expanded in response to access to funds, foreign building materials, local labor relations, and the creation and dismantling of organizational structures.
Matrimandir, a Sanskrit word, means literally, “the temple (or pavilion) of the Mother.” Even just at the level of its name, its meanings are multivalent. Firstly, while many of the growing numbers of Indian tourists may associate “temple” with the idea of a place built in honor of and intended for worship of a specific deity, most Aurovilians probably resist understanding the word in its more typical religious sense. According to Aurovilian Georges Van Vrekhem, “The symbolism is simple: the golden, supramental world is breaking out of the Matter as we know it, out of the Earth as it is now; the New World is being born” (2000: 524). This idea of a birth shifts the pavilion from the realm of the inanimate and into that of conscious existence. On the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone on February 21, 1971, the Mother said, “Let the Matrimandir be the living symbol of Auroville’s aspiration for the Divine” (as quoted in Van Vrekhem 2000: 524).

In a sense, the building is “alive.” There are corporeal metaphors used in describing it; the outer golden disks are likened to a “skin” and the steel structure is referred to as a “functional body” (AV International 1990). The round crystal at its center functions as a kind of “eye of power” through which individuals surrender themselves to the omniscient surveillance of the divine. The rays of light radiating out from this eye illuminate the meditators, awakening in turn a more divine vision than that possible through the senses. The temple is intended to see and make
others see as well. In this way, it takes on a kind of subjectivity through which it actively engages with individuals and the community. This identity is nothing less than, in Mother’s words, “the soul of Auroville.” The location of the building at the very center point of Auroville reinforces this significance.

Incarnating the very spirit of the community, Matrimandir is in the process of making concrete the social body of what is still a very disperse society. In fact, it is seen as necessary for the creation of that society. Mother indicated clearly that the building would be indispensable for the eventual realization of Auroville’s goals. Matrimandir is, therefore, seen by many Aurovilians as “a kind of dynamo for channeling and directing the Force of the Great Mother to support the development of Auroville and the transformation of the world” (Van Vrekhem 2000: 524). The performative powers of the building would seem to be immense. As such it is not surprising that Matrimandir is the site of the greatest concentration of ongoing, communal effort to date and that threats to its timely completion are so distressing for so many Aurovilians.

And it is not only Aurovilians who are concerned. People from throughout the world follow the construction’s progress, through Auroville’s website, and the monthly “Matrimandir” column in AV Today. There is even a quarterly publication, entitled Matrimandir Journal, which provides periodic information about the building and discusses its symbolism in relation to the writings of the Mother and
Sri Aurobindo. There is a sense that watching the building’s progress is like watching the development of the community as a whole.

For example, at the inauguration of the Pavilion of the Americas, one of the buildings commemorating the spirit of the various nations of the world to be erected in Auroville’s “International Zone,” the United States Consul from Madras remembered a time some thirty years earlier when he had visited Auroville as a young traveler, back when Matrimandir was only a large hole in the ground. He marveled at the building’s present state and then went on to elaborate on the common theme of how amazing it is that a vibrant, forested community could have grown out of what was literally a desert.

Matrimandir is more than just a symbol of progress, however, as it is possessed of multiple identities. Once again the boundaries between the social and the sacred, between the human and the divine are blurred. The building is supported by four gigantic pillars, which were completed during the very first phases of construction. As per Mother’s specifications, the pillars are named after the four powers of the universal mother force (Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, and Mahasaraswati respectively). These forces are those that will allow the transformation of life to occur. Because of Matrimandir’s instrumental power in this process, it does not so much harbor these principles as it embodies them and acts in the world through them. Because the connection of the pavilion
with the Divine Mother force is so strong, and because Mother herself is so identified with that same force, it is safe to say that the building is yet another of Mother’s own manifestations. Matrimandir incarnates in cement her consciousness and its corresponding capability for expanding the consciousness of others.

It is a highly performative structure, in as much as it brings to life one of the primary principles of the Aurobindonian philosophy, namely the capacity for divine force to descend into the material realm where it enlivens inert or unconscious matter. It is important to clarify that the pavilion is not performative solely in the narrow sense of articulating ideas at the level of the visual imagination. At issue is that the Matrimandir’s architecture is not a mere backdrop, but an actual participant in human experience. As elaborated in the comprehensive, cross-cultural work of architectural historian Lindsay Jones, this calls for looking at buildings not in relation to fixed structures of idealized meanings, but in terms of “ceremonial (and sometimes unceremonious) situations that bring people and buildings into active interaction,” occasions which can be described as “ritual-architectural events” (2000a: xxviii). Under certain conditions, “the link between building elements and ritual participants is direct, immediate, and unmitigated” (2000b: 214). From this perspective, Matrimandir is not so much a place for meditative contemplations as it is an actor in ritualized activities. Sri Aurobindo and Mother did not prescribe mandatory meditation for devotees, nor did they establish any technique or system.
The Mother did affirm, however, that meditating in Matrimandir was not the same as doing it in other locations. Because of the structure’s generative powers, many Aurovilians believe that in Matrimandir it is easier to establish a connection with the divine and to focus the different parts of one’s being around an aspiration for greater light. Matrimandir, like many instances of sacred architecture, “serves variously as an object of concentration, a prop or focus for devotion, an aid to spiritual exercise or ascent, a support, or a guide – in short, a direct catalyst of religious/ritual experience” (214). As a Dutch woman who has lived in Auroville from its early days put it, echoing the feelings of many to whom I spoke:

SASKIA: Matrimandir channels the divine force, so I always feel that sitting quietly there -I couldn’t honestly say that I am always meditating, precisely – it’s like sitting under a great waterfall of light. I feel so much more centered sitting there, like the light from that crystal is shooting right into my very core. When I look up at the ceiling, I feel like every bit of me is reaching up for something (2001).

Thus, many Aurovilians believe that Matrimandir actively provides both the material and non-material conditions for a more rapid and concrete realization of the divine. At the same time, as many Aurovilians are quick to cite with humor about themselves, this does not prevent people from frequently dozing off and snoring in the chamber.

The actual moment of sitting and contemplating in Matrimandir is the climactic phase in what is a ritual process that begins before entering the chamber and continues after the mediation ends. This process creates what Fernandez
identifies as the sacred "architectonic," namely "the feeling tones that activity in various constructed spaces evokes and that makes them places" (2003: 185). To begin with, the process of gaining access to Matrimandir recreates and reaffirms the pavilion's divine nature. These routines erect the boundary of purity and danger, which in a variety of contexts cross-culturally have served to demarcate what is sacred (Douglas 1966). People come to Matrimandir throughout the day and into the evening to meditate, with the exception of a few hours in the afternoon when day visitors queue up to catch a glimpse of the inner chamber. After parking some slight distance from the building one walks silently through the Matrimandir gardens to the main entrance. Non-Aurovilians must show a pass and sign their name with the attendant. After removing shoes, Aurovilians usually walk right in, although as the community grows in size there is discussion about whether it will become necessary to display some form of identification, an idea that many residents bitterly resist. Visitors sometimes pause to regard the building as whole from without. Once inside, one winds up a spiral ramp, past the ongoing construction and up to the entrance of the inner chamber. There is no elevator, making building access difficult for people with physical challenges. At the inner chamber an attendant silently hands one a pair of clean white socks that are worn by all to protect the pristine white of the hall against dirt and stains. Although there are no special movements involved, the deliberateness with which many attendants
carry out their task in silence, including the very conscious gestures they may use to indicate without speech what a person needs to do, creates an atmosphere of ceremony removing the building even more from the stream of everyday life. The attitude with which the work is done is important; the volunteers come from Auroville's resident population and refer to their shifts as "chamber duty," connoting the conducting of a calling higher than that of a mundane task or job. On the part of the meditators, donning the socks is a kind of rite of passage inaugurating one's final, if temporary, departure from the noisy outside world and journey towards another dimension.\(^\text{12}\) At the same time, the socks remind one that while sacred forces may manifest in the world, care must be taken to protect them from the encroachments of undesirable elements.

One then passes through a narrow doorway that opens out onto the vaulted, circular room. Selecting one of the available cushions, you may sit and meditate as long as you like. Leaning against the walls is not permissible, once again for fear of sullying the chamber. The very fact of being present in a completely white space, so divested of any visual or audial stimuli, carries one into another moment in space and time.

\(^{12}\) Van Gennep's ([1909] 1981) classic theorizing of initiation rites defines three phases: separation, a transition, and incorporation. All three of these phases are marked. In the case at hand, the socks, in addition to their practical value, are visual signifiers of the separation from the realm of daily life.
Non-Aurovilians are free to meditate in Matrimandir, but only upon completion of a series of steps. In 2003 the procedure was as follows: first, one must acquire a pass from the Visitors’ Center, located a ten minute walk away, which then allows one to proceed through the main visitors’ entrance of Matrimandir. Here one lines up beginning at precisely 4:00 p.m. in order to walk through the gardens to the pavilion, wind up the ramp, and file past the entrance of the inner chamber to catch a glimpse of the white interior for a handful of seconds before descending and exiting the building. The scene can sometimes be a bit chaotic, as at times there are large numbers of people, not all of whom have clear expectations about what they are coming to see or about the rules to be followed. The attendants that orchestrate this movement, drawn mostly from the pool of local labor rather than Auroville itself, have their work cut out for them, defending the silence and making sure that no shoes or belongings are carted inside. Some conduct their work in a gruff, impatient manner, however, which can cause arguments and generally creates an atmosphere of tension that stands at odds with the silence that reigns inside. Once one has gone through this process, one proceeds to an office on site where a renewable visitors’ meditation pass is issued for a specified length of time. On the whole, the process is time-consuming and somewhat unpleasant, particularly if one must make the queue on a hot day. Nevertheless, both in practical and ritual terms, it is logical. As argued by
Goffman, sacred spaces are created in relation to rules of decorum that are very different from ones that prevail in everyday places of work (1959: 109). The expectations for behavior in the context of Matrimandir are not self-evident; they must be learned and followed in order to maintain the kind of sanctity Auroville seeks to create in the inner chamber. It is part of the ritual process by which one divests oneself of the ways of the world and passes into an extra-daily identity that prepares one for communion with larger forces. It makes the space of the inner chamber extraordinary, a basic prerequisite for the nature of the activity to take place there.\(^ {13} \) Furthermore, in structuring the use of the temple space through rules and conventional behaviors, Aurovilians seek to prevent Matrimandir from degenerating to the level of mere spectacle, a great fear on the part of many residents given the increasing numbers of tourists to the site.\(^ {14} \)

\(^ {13} \) Goethals (1996) argues that ritual acts and spaces are dialogically intertwined; the space, identified by participants as special, allows certain kinds of activities to unfold. At the same time, the conducting of those activities in that particular space is what imbues the site with meaning.

\(^ {14} \) Macaloon (1996) asserts that definitions of spectacle have changed over time, but emphasizes the association of the concept with “sights” of certain scale or grandeur, something that quite naturally could be said to describe the singular architecture and location of Matrimandir. Unlike rituals or even festivals, spectacles do not denote a specific style or mood apart from awe or wonder. Rules must be put in place to convey a sense of the sacred, as well as to allow ritual to be a process for social transitions. As noted by Tambiah (1996), rules, in addition to setting sequences for events, are also important in distinguishing ritual activities from the unpredictability of spectacles such as sport.
The architectural-ritual event that is Matrimandir, like all performances, involves various activities that take place behind-the-scenes. After hours, cleaning routines help to set the stage for purity. A friend of mine, who served alongside me as a guest editor of the monthly magazine, *A V Today*, highlighted the perfunctorily efficient manner in which the crews, drawn from a pool of Aurovilians and guests, perform their tasks in a short, mildly humorous piece he wrote, entitled “Cleaning the Chamber” for the Matrimandir column:

It is a dramatic transformation. One moment the Chamber is as usual: quiet, reverent, peaceful, dim. As always, the eye is drawn immediately to the glowing crystal. Suddenly, strong overhead lights are turned on: voices are heard issuing instructions; another set of doors is opened; a vacuum cleaner is wheeled in, followed by crates containing clean sheets and cushion covers. It is all light, sound, activity. Astonishingly, the crystal is almost reduced to being furniture (Clouston 2000: 3).

Matrimandir after-hours resembles Goffman’s back region or backstage, “defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (1959: 112). The transformations of consciousness that are the objective during the meditation hours stand in contrast to the kind of “dramatic transformation” David talks about, yet the two are mutually interdependent.

Not all that takes place behind-the-scenes is so straightforward, however. Matrimandir is caught in the play of social forces, and becomes the stage for dramatic battles of power between individuals and factions in the community. In
2003 some long-standing disputes came to a head, erupting as various, vicious verbal attacks launched against specific individuals; also labor disputes that almost halted further construction; and a seemingly endless series of argumentative community meetings and correspondence published in the weekly community newsletter *A V News*. All of this all but hijacked attention away from any one of a number of other issues pressing upon Auroville’s development. The debates revolve around authority, ownership, and money.

Questions of authority operate on two levels. First of all, there is the question of design. Matrimandir’s design is attributed to Roger Anger, a man sometimes referred to as “Mother’s architect.” Anger, a Frenchman who resides off and on in Auroville, designed many of the buildings constructed during Auroville’s early years. During the late 60s, the Mother spoke to him of her visions for the temple at the center of Auroville. Some of her specifications were rich in detail, while others were more nebulous. Accordingly, Anger came up with a series of drawings that he then brought to the Mother for her approval. The current Matrimandir is the product of the final design. Over the years, aspects of it have come into question, including the building’s lack of handicap access, the wasteful use of water for the proposed surrounding lake, and the symbolic design of landscaping for the outside gardens. Even elements of the aesthetic have drawn criticism from some. For example, there are those who feel that the monumental
statues which Anger determined would one day adorn each entrance are far too
epic and do not fit in with either the Mandir’s purpose or the rest of its design.

The question has been tossed around as to just how divinely sanctioned
Anger’s authority is. For some, the fact that the Mother herself approved the design
is enough. Others, on the other hand, feel that just as Mother was always changing
her ideas as developments evolved, she never intended for the original design to be
made without any sort of modification, nor did she mean to suggest that Anger was
to have the last word in all matters. It boils down once again to the thorny matter of
interpretation of the Mother’s written texts. All kinds of theories and justifications
are offered passionately from any side of the argument. I have heard it said in
public meetings that people such as Anger are to be respected (i.e. unquestioned)
because the Mother had selected them based on their unique receptivity to her own
consciousness. I have also heard people then retort that Mother often asked people
to do things not because she wanted them done in a certain way, but because there
was something about it that would be salubrious for the person’s own inner growth.
All of these viewpoints seem equally based on conjecture to other observers, who
stake the claim that in the end no one around really knows what the Mother
intended, or if she had fixed ideas about anything in the first place.

Authority is also contested in the arena of the day-to-day running of
Matrimandir generally, including its funds. Matrimandir has long been one of the
few projects in Auroville whose funds do not pass through the Central Fund, where they are subject to the supervision of the community as a whole. Instead, up until 2004, the scrutiny of its money was within the purview of a few people who had been running the show independently for many years. Efforts to create transparency, in addition to a more open organization, met with resistance. Those in control of Matrimandir seemed, in the eyes of other Aurovilians, to wield considerable power. This power manifest itself through control over the large numbers of Tamil workers on the site, as well as through connections to well-placed officials in the Indian government, who are capable of creating visa difficulties for Auroville’s foreigners. Many Aurovilians seemed to feel that Matrimandir’s organizers had long commandeered what should have been communal property, making the building difficult to access without their permission. For example, during a meeting in 2001, some people expressed dismay over what they claimed was the organizers’ refusal to allow a group meditation to take place in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack of September 11. In other discussions I even heard people state that they felt as if the Matrimandir management team behaved as priests of a high temple. Given the importance of Matrimandir, it is not
surprising that debates about such problems during 2002 and 2003 were acrimonious.¹⁵

The veracity and details of these current issues are not of importance here, however. What is imperative to note in the course of this discussion is that once again the sacred does not exist outside of the various and competing interpretations made about it by those who participate in creating it. Matrimandir appears as if standing at the crossroads of two contradictory modes of being. On one hand, the building, for all that people say about it and the active role that it plays in contemplative rituals, is a living embodiment of the Mother and the consciousness that she represents. On the other, it is the ground on which philosophical battles are waged and real social and economic power are won and lost. Matrimandir, for the moment, is both a living symbol of people’s aspiration for a future transformation, and a dramatic illustration of their present condition.

The contradictions inherent in all this are not lost on Aurovilians themselves. Many are actually very critical of the resources and attention that focus on Matrimandir. Although to entertain such doubts in public forums would flout unwritten rules of conduct that govern talking about things sacred, Auroville is an ¹⁵ Although beyond the time period of the writing of this dissertation, it can be noted that by mid 2004 the situation had changed. A new management team took up the task of supervising Matrimandir’s funds and construction. New workers—many of them Aurovillian—were employed and new procedures for entering the facility were instated. Some disputes remained unresolved.
open enough field to allow critical voices a place. Just as the sanctimoniousness of a text as important as *Savitri* can become the inspiration for a humorous columnist in *A V News* (see Chapter 4), Matrimandir’s sacred aura and the human foibles that surround it can also serve as material for ironic takes on the nature of Auroville’s spiritual quest generally. I close this chapter with one such take, a poem published by a now deceased, North American Aurovilian named Kenneth (Fator 1998: 69). A friend of mine bought me a copy of his little book some years ago. Reading this poem, and hearing from others snippets of Kenneth’s colorful life history as a supposed ex-convict, I longed to interview him. Unfortunately, he passed away about one month before I planned to approach him in 2003:

*Squeaking Up*

They have been building a new god-trap
for the past twenty-seven years, enticing
divinity with their cheesy worship;
as if truth is a supramental mouse,
invisibly reflected – while the sun shines –
in the clarity of a pseudo-crystal
ball, which only god may or not touch;
except on Sunday mornings; the metaphor
then dusted – for holy fingerprints?

Perhaps someone remembered the old saw:
“Build a better mouse-trap and the world beats
a path to your door” in this case kept locked
by the keepers of the keys and cheese.

Curious, noses twitching, awed, they come
like scouts advancing before the golden Lord.
Conclusion

However one may regard her, the Mother is an extraordinary figure. During the course of her singular life, she drew together a wide range of cultural elements and synthesized a unique perspective on women, society, and spirituality. To confine her to a curriculum vita, however, does not do justice to the importance and implications that she and her work continue to have for many people’s lives. Inhabiting this world in special, enlivened material artifacts, the Mother continues to guide and support her growing numbers of devotees, including large numbers of Tamil people who have incorporated her into their beliefs about divine feminine principles more generally.

Her living presence constitutes the “spiritual magnetism” that draws people from near and far to Auroville. This attraction is not centered purely in an intrinsic holiness, but derives from human concepts and values. In other words, the sacred is socially constituted. On one level, the Mother’s power moves through the personal relationships that people enter into with her. On another, her force lives in the symbols that Aurovilians rally around in their creation of a sense of community.

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16 Preston develops the concept of “spiritual magnetism” in the course of his discussion about pilgrimage. Defining it “simply as the power of a pilgrimage shrine to attract devotees,” he argues that it is not an inherently “holy quality of mysterious origins that radiates objectively from a place,” but rather that it develops “because of the interplay of traceable forces that seem mysterious to participants but have measurable referents in empirical reality” (1992: 33). This empirical reality is constituted by the domain of the social.
This does not mean, however that Mother is a common object of worship. As my Aurovillian informants have shown me, there are many different interpretations of the Mother. It is almost mysterious how so many disparate views can coalesce into making her a common point of reference. Then again, it is surely the open-ended nature of symbols that allows people from a variety of perspectives to reference them, including if only to disavow their significance.

Existing in the social realm, it is impossible to think about conceptualizations of the sacred outside of questions of power. Unequal relations of power emerge in the context of building personal prestige (as amongst the panelists of Remembering Mother), control over meanings (as in the offering of flowers or the public display of photographs), authority (in the case of “Mother’s architect,” Roger Anger) and organizational hierarchies (like those governing Matrimandir and its development). Thus, over thirty years after her death, the Mother remains both a transcendent force in Auroville and a vortex of contestation. Her life, work, and ongoing presence are as much about this world, as they are about the potential for another.
CHAPTER 6

INDIA: THE LAND OF ALL DIFFICULTIES AND CURES

From Auroville’s beginning, the Mother made it very clear that the project had to unfold in India. On February 3, 1968, she is recorded in the Agenda as stating:

‘India has become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of present-day humanity. India will be the site of its resurrection, the resurrection of a higher and truer life.’ And the clear vision: the same thing which in the history of the universe has made the earth the symbolic representation of the universe so as to be able to concentrate the work at one point, the same phenomenon is occurring now. India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that there will be the...cure. And it is for that – it is FOR THAT that I had to create Auroville (AV Press n.d.: 61).

Reading statements such as this, it is hard not to have a sense of the overwhelming importance of the Mother’s careful choice of location for her dream society. Her instructions for the performance of her vision stand inextricably tied to a particular geographic and cultural entity. Any effort to enact her ideals, and the philosophical system that supports them, must be staged in a very particular space. In other words, the mise-en-scene of a collective transformation in evolution could take place only in India, even if its scope was universal in nature.

Consequently, it is impossible to appreciate the full complexity of Auroville without coming to terms with the rich and contradictory relationship the
community and its residents have with the setting of their utopian performance. This relationship with the wider world of India manifests in the mutually intertwined material and conceptual dimensions of social life. As far as Auroville’s physical development is concerned, it is a fact that the Tamil village population has served as the primary labor pool for most of Auroville’s construction and domestic work. Furthermore, the unique status the Indian government has conferred upon Auroville, and the general tolerance that officials have bestowed on the community, have made for the community’s continued existence. As for the ongoing conceptualization of a unique community identity, the idea of India (as a nation, a culture, and a people) is an important point of reference for many Aurovilians in defining who they are, in promoting their community’s development, and in carrying out the essential tasks of everyday life.

In this chapter I will examine the complicated relationship between Auroville and India, focusing on the cultural aspects of this encounter. First, I will examine the varied perceptions that Aurovilians have about local Tamil village populations. Second, I will look at Aurovilian representations of Indian culture that resonate with certain themes of current religious and cultural nationalism.

As I will attempt to show, Aurovilians’ perspectives on the meaning and value of local and supposedly pan-Indian symbols and practices are rarely coherent. Similarly, residents’ views about the intentions and capacities of Indian people are
not consistent. The picture that arises is one of contradictions and ironies. In the course of numerous mundane and ritualistic encounters, many Aurovilians zigzag between a view of India as anachronistic and in need of transformation, on the one hand, and as the holder of the key to all humanity's future, on the other. In the end both positions serve to empower Auroville's own emerging identity, either by way of contrast or by justifying locating the community's philosophy and objectives squarely within the realm of Indian tradition. Seeing India as backwards bolsters the belief in the need for evolution, while seeing India as enlightened is an important means by which people articulate why it is important that India be the setting for performing the Mother's vision.

Aurovilians' relationship to India is not anomalous, in my view, but rather a concrete, contemporary manifestation of the much longer history of Western encounters with and depictions of the "exotic East." Since the colonial era, interest in Indian culture and, more specifically, with its supposedly transcendental concerns, has been a source of European and later American condemnation of and admiration for India.¹ The 1960s psychedelic era, with its emphasis on the need to explore other modes of consciousness, motivated many Westerners to travel to

India. The last few years have seen a revival of interest in India, with a focus on everything from the nation’s software production, its burgeoning middle class market, and traditional cultural practices. Indian products and images – from clothing to yoga, t-shirts with Hindu gods and goddesses to celebrity sightings at the 2000 Kumba Mela – bombard transnational markets (Corliss 2001; Mead 2000). Auroville is a unique case study for examining such a phenomenon, given that Aurovilians, who come largely from Europe and a few from the United States, actually reside in India. Moreover, Aurovilians develop a unique perspective because the community’s geographical location allows for readings of a local-

2 Mehta’s (1979) widely-read, humorous yet cutting treatise on the common practices of Westerners traveling to India for drugs, spirituality, or more often some combination of the two, is insightful in posing the complexities of the ensuing cultural encounters. At the same time, the book nostalgically suggests that there exists some form of pristine Indian spirituality that exists outside of consumption and which Indians themselves understand more clearly.

3 This traditional pilgrimage mega-event, known as the largest gathering of human beings at any one point on the planet, takes place every twelve years in Prayog near the city of Allahabad. In 2001 the event took on new proportions with unprecedented numbers of foreigners in attendance, including many who had never before traveled to India. Media coverage, both in India and abroad, highlighted the participation of such noteworthy participants as Madonna and Demi Moore, among others. Clever entrepreneurs had sought reservations long in advance for the luxurious accommodations, which included hot water and kitchen facilities, erected alongside the makeshift tents and outdoor sleeping arrangements of most of those at the Mela. Tension mounted at one point as a group of sadhus (Hindu holy renunciates) protested the alleged serving of meat in the luxury suites. The conflict was abated when the up-scale crowd provided the protestors with several hundred pounds of ghee-rice, a prescribed anecdote for appeasing holy men.

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specific culture, while the philosophy and dealings with the government bring about broader conceptualizations of "pan Indian" values and traditions.4

As in other aspects of everyday life in the community, Aurovilians’ perceptions of India and their ongoing interactions with Indian people are informed by the processes of reading, interpreting and performing the ideas of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo on the topic. I will examine how these texts have been interpreted and cited in the course of specific events and interactions, with an eye to the implications that the performance of Auroville’s script have for both local power relations and broader political agendas exercised by particular segments of India’s current nationalist movement. The interpretation of core texts, in addition to the ongoing interactions of everyday life, are framed by a complicated matrix of race, class, gender, and nostalgia, through which Aurovilians seek to formulate their own identity in relation to constructed Others. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the enactment of the vision of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the world today reveals as much about current social inequalities and the contradictions of modernity, as it indicates a potential for a more enlightened society.

4 In my interest in how Europeans and Americans identify “good” elements of “Indian” culture, and the processes by which they adopt these practices and ideas into their own lives, my thinking is indebted to Donald Lopez’s work (1997) on the essentialist versions of Buddhism created by Euro-American Buddhists.
Having said this, noting that Aurovilians’ engagement with India is problematic is not to associate circumstances with a simplistic notion of colonial-style domination in which diverse relationships are reduced to a model of one-way control. My thinking about this is indebted to the work of the Comaroffs (1997) whose lengthy exploration of the colonial encounter in South Africa demonstrates that colonialism (and its allied later concepts of “neocolonialism” and “postcolonialism”) cannot be grappled with under the simple, dualistic terms that have frequently represented it. Through detailed examination of the mundane events and organization of daily life, the Comaroffs argue that the colonial encounter was always a dialectical field, mediated by cultural distinctions and social differences, in which colonizers and colonized made reciprocal determinations. This is not to turn a blind eye towards the very real differences of technology, knowledge, and resources, but rather to highlight the fact that imbalances between Auroville and its surroundings have been contested and are by no means pre-determined. Moreover, Auroville is in very real ways at the mercy of others; for its very survival the community must negotiate with Indians at all levels and present an image of itself that garners their support. Thus, what I hope to portray is that Auroville and the villages, and Auroville and the wider context of the Indian nation, are not discrete worlds, but intertwined spheres of mutual influence.
The First Aurovilians

One of the first things visitors to Auroville notice are the large numbers of Tamil people moving in and around and working in the community. The status of these people varies widely. In the course of any one day, one can encounter Tamilians who are official residents, women working as maids and cooks, workers of varying degrees of skill in Auroville industries and businesses, loin-clothed shepherds tending their cattle or goats, young people studying in Auroville-organized schools, tourists arriving in buses from throughout Tamil Nadu, and villagers from surrounding areas going about their business as they pass through Auroville roads on motorbikes, bicycles, tractors, or bullock carts. A wide range of interactions takes place between Aurovilians and the Tamilians. These can be characterized as anything from distant to contractual to friendly to intimate.

It would be safe to say that there are no other places in India where large numbers of foreigners reside in such close, daily contact with so many local people, and in particular with rural people. The uniqueness of Auroville in this regard is not lost on Aurovilians. Almost every brochure or video produced about the community includes a narrative about its relationship with the local people and features illustrations of either smiling Tamil children or Aurovilians and Tamilians working together. For example, one of the current brochures, “Auroville: A Dream Takes Shape” (1995), includes among its various subject headings about essential

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aspects of life in the community a section entitled, “Concern for the Surrounding
Villages.” Indeed, Tamilians play an important role in the ongoing construction of
Auroville, shaping the daily life of its residents, and figuring prominently in the
representations Aurovilians make about their community. In other words, the
Tamil villagers are crucial participants in the creation of an Aurovilian identity.

The important role of local Tamil people in the mandate and success of
Auroville was often underscored by the Mother herself. In conversations with
Aurovilians during the early days she frequently reiterated the need for creating
harmony with local people, seeking their cooperation and participation in a range of
matters. For example, in a message written in 1969 to residents of Auroville’s first
community, Aspiration, the Mother stated,

A relationship that is not only cordial but friendly with the inhabitants of the
neighboring village is absolutely indispensable. For the realization of
Auroville the first step is to establish a true human fraternity – any
shortcoming in this regard is a grave mistake which can compromise the
whole work. My blessings are with all sincere efforts towards harmony
(1980a: 249).

Such early efforts included such things as distributing sweets to all families,
providing health care, and generally seeking to build an atmosphere of mutual
respect and trust.

The Mother’s early words on the topic frequently find their way into present
discussions about the stance that Auroville should adopt in its relations with local
villagers including the community's position on local applicants seeking to become official Aurovilians. As in all other aspects of life in the community, interpretations are multiple and are contextualized by the interpreter's experience and views on particular topics. One commonly circulated quotation is the description "first Aurovilians" for referring to Tamil village people. During my time in Auroville I heard this epithet used in a variety of situations. It seemed to be commonly accepted that the Mother had spoken in this way. Many residents I spoke with believed that the term was used in the course of a conversation between the Mother and Varadarajan. Varadarajan is an educated man hailing from Madras who joined Auroville in its earliest days. The Mother had given to Varadarajan and his partner, Shyamala, the task of conducting educational and outreach programs in local villages and assisting with the integration of some Tamil families into Auroville. To this date Varadarajan has dedicated himself, among other things, to the education of local children and adults. Going hand in hand with the Mother's other statement about the original inhabitants of the region being collectively 100% ready for the transformations that were to take place in the world, many Aurovilians asserted that by "first Aurovilians" the Mother indicated that local people are to be treated as "brothers in spirit" in the fullest possible sense.

But what exactly does this mean? Does it mean that the local people are in no sense inferior to Aurovilians, that they should be treated with absolute equality
in all dealings? Or does it mean that they are official residents of the community of Auroville and therefore should be entitled to the benefits and opportunities that such a status confers? At issue is whether or not “Aurovilian” refers to an essential quality and aspiration of the human spirit or a geographically-specific, institutional association.

Such questions have gained critical importance in recent years with increasing numbers of villagers seeking to become Aurovilians. Pressure on the Entry Group to facilitate or curb this process has come from all sides. During 2002, in the wake of the Group’s denial of status to a long-time Tamil Aurovilian’s wife, some Tamil Aurovilians organized a protest calling for a series of meetings with the Entry Group and launching a series of diatribes in the internally-circulating AV News. Several non-Tamil Aurovilians were among their

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5 I do not quote from this source directly, as AV News is intended strictly for internal circulation within Auroville. For most of the community’s history, AV News was an open forum for any announcements or voicing points of view. An Aurovilian had only to submit copy before the weekly deadline. This openness ended in 2003, when the Auroville Council and Working Committee put into place controls over the kind of material that the newsletter may include. It is no longer an “open mike” sort of a document, but basically a platform from which to announce upcoming events, advertise new Auroville products and services, etc. According to many people I spoke with, the community felt that curtailing the AV News content was a necessary step towards insulating the community from reactions from unbalanced negative press. The problems resulting from the free use of AV News as an outlet to promote unsubstantiated accusations and personal attacks, without complete coverage of opposing points of view, had included inviting questions from government officials, as well as from Auroville’s
supporters, but several Tamil Aurovilians were strongly opposed to the group’s assertions. The statements from the pressuring side reached what seemed to me hyperbolic proportion. Auroville’s stance with respect to village populations was compared with South African apartheid, in my own view an absurdly simplistic and inaccurate perspective, not to mention offensive in its denial of the scale of violence and injustice suffered by the millions who actually lived under apartheid and continue to suffer from its effects. Nevertheless, what is of interest here is the fact that such characterizations were frequently broadcast. The perceived injustice was formulated in meetings, casual conversations, and writing in terms of the community’s negation of the true identity of local people. The Mother’s quotation was used as the basis to assert certain rights and entitlements.

But in the view of some other people the Mother never indicated that Tamil people were to become residents of Auroville in the way that some interpretations of “first Aurovilian” had implied. An editorial in AV Today stated that it was not the Mother who had used this phrase, but Varadarajan in a memo he wrote to her in 1970: “The first citizens of Auroville are those Tamil people who live on the soil of supporters abroad. This was something that official channels in the community, as well as many of its residents at large, felt put Auroville at risk of unwelcome government intervention. It is because of the touchy nature of AV News that I do not cite from it here. As of the writing of this dissertation, I was unable to obtain a clear answer from anyone in the community as to what public rights over back issue content would be.
Auroville.” The editorial asserted that the Mother had “merely endorsed” this message as part of Varadarajan’s liaison work with the villages. Meanwhile, she had continued to accept applications personally for Aurovillian status (Tim 2001: 5). A Tamil Aurovilian I spoke with had another view. He believed that the “first Aurovilians” had come from a message the Mother had written to inhabitants of Auroville’s first settlement, Aspiration.

Confusion about quotations aside, the fact remains that in the view of many Aurovilians, the Mother made it clear that local people had an important role to play in Auroville were to be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. This belief stands as a backdrop for the all that has ensued between the community and its neighbors, adding an additional layer of complexity to complicated social interactions. It serves also as a barometer from which Aurovilians may seek to measure the gap between the Mother’s aspirations and the present-day conditions in the community. None of the Aurovilians with whom I have spoken fooled themselves about such matters. Although they expressed varying degrees of interest in the issue of Auroville-Tamil village relations, no one would say that Auroville had already established the “true human fraternity” that the Mother wanted.
At a glance it would be easy to write-off the relationship between Auroville and local people as exploitative. Current estimates put the number of Tamilians working in the community daily at around 5,000.\textsuperscript{6} Most perform the manual labor that many Aurovilians are either unwilling to do or cannot do effectively given their small numbers. The availability of cheap labor has been indispensable for Auroville’s growth. Furthermore, land for Auroville’s urban development has been acquired over the years from village people, prompting shifts in traditionally agriculturally-based economies.

While income opportunities have promoted independence for women, rapid rises in wealth in the villages have also invited ills such as the cessation of traditional practices, pollution, and violence. When it comes to women workers in Auroville, the opportunities that come with independent income are unprecedented, especially considering that male alcoholism is widespread in village areas and women are routinely the victims of domestic violence. Moreover, traditionally they lack control over family resources. At the same time, it is not surprising that village women working in Auroville enter into compromised relationships of power with their employers. There are cases of both welcome sexual advances made by European men to these women, as well as unwelcome ones (although, to my

\textsuperscript{6} The estimate comes from Auroville’s Master Plan (AV Foundation 2001).
knowledge there have been no cases of rape or sexual abuse in which legal action was taken). Encounters have, in cases, resulted in abortions, according to one highly knowledgeable source, who has worked extensively with village women in the area.

With respect to violence, while Auroville, like anywhere else, had always been the target for the occasional aggressive or repeat-offender thief, in recent years physical attacks, in which both Aurovilians and villagers have been victims, have increased. Particularly inflammatory has been the area of the village of Kuilapalayam (population 2,256)

7 See Auroville’s website, www.auroville.org
The reasons behind the rise of these gangs are various, in the estimation of Aurovilians with whom I spoke. To begin with, there is the fact of increasing violence in Tamil Nadu generally, which many people seem to associate with mimicry of the extreme violence routinely depicted in widely consumed Tamil films. Then there is the fact that the village has seen a rapid influx of money, which has altered its economy and eroded traditional authority structures. Finally, but significantly, its youth has ample opportunity to observe and aspire to different standards of living with Auroville so close at hand.

The story has a seedier side as well. For many years a French Aurovilian regularly patronized young men from Kuilapalayam, soliciting both domestic labor and sexual services. According to Tamil Aurovilians I know, it was a fact widely known amongst villagers and other Tamil Aurovilians, but about which many European and North Indian Aurovilians were either ignorant or preferred to ignore. Apparently many of this man’s employees became active members of the gangs and supported their criminal activities with money obtained from him. The situation came to light in 2002-3, and the man was kicked out of Auroville. He later returned to France. The gangs continue to exist, however, with violent flare-ups occurring periodically.

The threat that violence could escalate not just in Kuilapalayam but the whole region and jeopardize the safety of Aurovilians is real. Aurovilian women
seem particularly at risk. As white women are commonly regarded by Indian men as sexually available, they are often the victims of unpleasant verbal “teasing” and, more seriously, physical molestation, even on public roadways in Auroville in broad daylight. I personally know of a rape case against a foreign woman guest in Auroville that took place in 2002 and for which the perpetrator was convicted and imprisoned in 2004. But men are also at risk. Just in 2004 Auroville witnessed the first violent death of one of its residents, a Dutch man, at the hand of local thugs. The perpetrators sought retribution for the man’s involvement as a witness to previous gang member related incidents. In the wake of such events Auroville as a whole has taken a much keener interest in creating partnerships with its neighbors. Residents have sought to open further channels of communication between panchayat leaders, village elders and Auroville’s Working Committee and Council. Generally speaking, there is more interest in keeping abreast of developments in the villages.

In spite of all these troubling circumstances, however, it is also true that villagers in the region have benefited greatly from Auroville’s presence. There is the documented fact that prior to Auroville’s comprehensive reforestation program, sections of land in the region were largely barren. Educational and medical facilities were very minimal, almost non-existent. Outside of agriculture, people had few other income generating opportunities. Today Auroville sponsored child
and adult educational outreach programs and schools and health facilities provide for thousands of local people. The Auroville Health Center provides care for 200 village patients daily at its headquarters or satellites. A team of 30 local women trained at the Center work in 17 villages, giving first aid, home cures and health education. As for schools, there are five Auroville sponsored schools dedicated to the education of hundreds of village children. Hundreds more adults and children receive schooling and vocational training at some ten night schools. Some of what is done in the classroom is quite progressive. For example, at the Life Education Center girls not only learn the basics and manual skills, they also participate in discussions aimed at problem-solving the tough issues of their lives. Many Aurovilians are involved in other grassroots level development projects with varied aims, including the empowerment of women, the promotion of indigenous plants, and research into more effective means for farmers to become self-sufficient. Pitchandikulam, aimed at the conservation and promotion of indigenous plants, documents bio resources in the region, facilitates traditional healers, and starts village herb gardens. Many other activities are organized by the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG). According to statistics from AVAG itself, the sum total of its programs touch some 70,000 people’s lives in the region. Various development and educational schemes operate in some 75 villages. The AVAG Primary Education Project visits 21 village schools weekly, providing
children with “play learning,” fieldtrips and music and art. An arts program caters to some 1,000 children in summer camps when school is not in session. Among the most successful of its programs is a women’s saving scheme, run by the women themselves. Some 1,000 women in 43 villages participate in such schemes. In some localities, women have together pooled up to 4 lakhs. Given a community its size, the number of programs that Auroville has organized or encouraged is quite impressive.

The mixed-bag of Auroville-village relations is further complicated by the fact that the largest percentage of Aurovilians hail from India with most of these residents coming from the surrounding area. This process began with Auroville’s inception. Many Tamilians have grown up in Auroville, making their lifestyles and cultural orientation worlds apart from their relatives residing in the villages. Today the large numbers of village applicants to become Aurovillian is a topic of debate, as many Aurovilians, both Western and North and South Indian, question whether it is the economic incentives or the principles that attract people.

At the same time, the experience of Tamil Aurovilians is difficult, as many must negotiate between the life they lead in Auroville and the obligations of family close at hand. Some feel that they are discriminated against within Auroville,

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8 All figures from www.auroville.org.
treated in disrespectful ways by employers, or mistaken for one another by people who do not recognize them as distinct individuals.\footnote{There is much that could be said about this. Time and space prevent elaboration here. For further details see Pillai 2001.}

Although there is no denying that Auroville has facilitated dramatic shifts in the daily lives of thousands of people living in the region, to create a simple causality between the existence of Auroville and social shifts in neighboring villages would be simplistic. As the Indian economy continues to privatize and globalize, social changes are inevitably happening in many parts of the country. Although occurring mostly in urban areas, increasing the spending power of the growing middle-class and marginalizing further the disenfranchised, change has also arrived outside major economic centers and in rural areas, reshaping the daily life of smaller cities and towns such as Pondicherry. As village economies change, and consumer attitudes shift in accordance with the new wave of middle-class appetites dramatized in Indian film, television, and advertising, the erosion of traditional power structures and the transformation of everyday life are inevitable.

Nevertheless, it is certain that the very local level globalization of the Pondy-Auroville region makes for a very particular kind of intense change within a short period of time. Auroville is a vastly different place than it was when it began in 1968. The same can obviously be said for its neighboring areas. In truth, these
two seemingly side-by-side worlds are but different points in the same
c constellation of forces. Just as they are mutually sustaining, so are they also
mutually defining. Both Aurovilians and Tamilians produce stereotypes, fantasies,
and confining representations about one another.

The scope and aim of this study is to focus exclusively on the Aurovilian
part of the equation, as this reveals much about the contradictory nature of
Auroville’s collective identity. The myriad representations different Aurovilians
make of local people and culture, in addition to the spatialized narratives they
create about Auroville-Tamilian interactions, are contradictory, making it
impossible to generalize. While some of these perceptions condemn Tamilians to
the realm of the primitive, others speak admiringly of the beauty and spirit of Tamil
culture. Looking closer, both positions reproduce classical Western tropes of
Orientalist horror, fascination, and missionary upliftment. Moreover, they are
perspectives that frequently find a basis in minimal actual knowledge and/or
interest in Tamil culture and language. There are important exceptions, however.
Some Aurovilians have sought to counter such representations and in so doing
enter into more mutual relations with local people.
Irrespective of what Auroville’s official script might have to say about the importance of the “first Aurovilians,” many Aurovilians I observed or spoke with perceived and represented Tamil people by way of stereotypes and fixed dichotomies. These stereotypes fly in the face of current principles of cultural relativism and/or multiculturalism. From the perspective of a social scientist from the United States, the looseness with which such stereotypes were produced often came as a surprise. For example, one morning in 1997 I hitched a ride from one end of the community to another. Riding in the vehicle with me were two long-time Italian Aurovilians. As the car passed through the village of Kuilapalayam, the driver recounted an earlier episode in which some boys had thrown stones at his car. The other man quipped, “Well, that shows they are living in the Stone Age!”

On another occasion I was having lunch at an Auroville snack bar with a young German Newcomer who seemed eager to share the details of her love life. Her new boyfriend was a young Tamilian working in one of Auroville’s small-scale industrial units. When I inquired as to whether her beau was an Aurovilian, she smiled and replied, “Oh, he is just another one of these village dogs!”

Such commentary would never be acceptable in any public forum, yet they reveal an important undercurrent that runs at least in some segments of the Auroville population: Tamil people are primitive. The first comment places Tamil
people in the realm of the pre-historic; they are frozen in time and continue to perpetuate behaviors that other human beings have long since abandoned. In identifying Tamil villagers as Stone Age dwellers, archaeological speculation is reconfigured to define current socio-economic inequities, justifying the distance the observers feel and locating differences within the realm of some essential nature of Tamil people, rather than in relation to actual material circumstances. Such appropriation of ideas about social evolution has long been a standard tactic in the historical construction of race in Europe and the United States.10

Moreover, when the observers are passing through the village they are isolated within the bubble-like confines of the vehicle; they do not occupy the same time as the stone-throwers. On the contrary, the respective parties reside in distant temporal planes, recalling the classic ethnographic mode of representation that Fabian dubs, “co-eval” (1983). The riders literally pass through and move on, while those in the village are stuck, incapable of creating change through time. The riders evaluate and represent the spectacle of those outside, while the stone-throwers respond to the riders non-verbally and with seemingly undue aggression.

10 Lewis Henry Morgan’s nineteenth century social Darwinist ideas of social evolution established an inevitable progression from savagery to barbarism and finally, civilization. The further development of this teleology formed the basis for legitimizing imperial conquest. For a discussion of how categories of race and relationships of power are linked to essential ideas about “nature,” see the collection of essays in Moore, Kosek, and Pandian 2003.
Those in the car tame the threat of the stones by identifying the throwers as anachronistic. The comment is particularly ironic, given that Kuilapalayam has changed rapidly in recent years. For example, most of the traditional thatched-roof huts have been replaced by cement structures, some even on a grand scale. The main area of commerce now boasts an ever-growing number of shops and services, including small stores selling electronics and doing photocopying.

The second comment reduces the Tamil man to the level of an animal. In naming him as “another” village dog, the speaker relies on the ubiquity of dogs particularly in rural areas, conveying that this man is one of many who are just like him. He is not an individual so much as he is an undifferentiated representative of a pack of wild, mangy types. While there is something unsavory about his breed of person, his animal nature presumably implies that he is an instinctive and eager sexual partner, which is what the speaker finds appealing about him and why he is even a topic of conversation to begin with. The comment is complicated by the fact that the politics of gender relations is at play in reverse: the Tamil man is objectified and made available for consumption by the female gaze, granted a gaze that perpetuates heteronormative modes of sexuality. The woman speaker transgresses hegemonic conceptions of passive or subordinate female sexuality, while simultaneously reaffirming the structural inequalities of race and class.
Thus, the two comments articulate the naturalization of racial, class, and – in the case of the latter – sexual differences. These constructions reinscribe socio-spatial hierarchies that both frame and are composed by ongoing social relations. Seeing Tamil village populations as in some sense inferior gives impulse to a range of actions that dramatize an ignorance of and disregard for local people and their cultural practices.

A very acute example took place in 2000 in an area located on the coastal side of the community. As related to me by a Tamil Aurovilian friend involved in the issue, the beach front property had been owned by Auroville from the community’s early days, but throughout had been used exclusively as the traditional cremation ground of the adjacent fishing village. Most Aurovilians, in fact, were probably not aware or had forgotten that the property was even held in Auroville’s name. At some point in the late 90s, however, someone realized the situation and a small group of Aurovilians came together with the idea of developing the parcel of land. Giving the project the name “Waves,” the group envisioned a kind of cultural center, with residences, guesthouses, and studio and performance spaces. The first step was to begin occupying the land. A few members of the group began living there in simple structures. This did not deter villagers, and they continued to conduct funeral rites on the property as they had been doing. Another Aurovilian friend told me that he had once been invited to a
small beach party at the home of one of the Waves settlers. He recounted that
incredibly, some meters away a funeral pyre burned, which the hostess, perhaps out
of concern to not alarm her guests, referred to as a “bonfire.” It is probable that the
hostess was unaware of the linguistic irony of her statement, given that bonfire,
etymologically speaking, derives from “bone-fire,” meaning a funeral.

Not surprisingly, the outside encroachment onto the ritually significant
space made for growing resentment. Over time a series of conversations,
discussions, and arguments ensued. By the time other Aurovilians came to know of
the situation, tensions had mounted to the point where village residents were
regularly breaking down any fencing erected on the plot and were making
threatening gestures towards the Waves dwellers. One evening a large group of
village men entered the area menacingly carrying sticks. Members of the local
ruling political party, the Hindu-nationalist BJP, began to capitalize upon the
sentiment, actively urging constituents to take steps to oust the Waves group.
Interestingly, the situation played well into the party’s nation-wide, xenophobic
rhetoric. The BJP printed flyers and posted them at public spaces around
Auroville. Titled “Appeal to Aurovilleans,” and signed at the bottom “B.J.P.
Kottakuppam.” The flyer presented a series of statements in bold, all-capitals font
encased in quotation marks:

“DO NOT SPOIL THE PEACE OF OUR VILLAGE”
"WE STRONGLY CONDEMN THE UNLAWFUL CONSTRUCTION OF AUROVILLEANS IN THE PUBLIC BURIAL GROUND OF PERIYAMUDALIYARCHAVADY BEACH"

"STOP TO CONSTRUCT THE BUILDING IN THE PEOPLE'S BURIAL GROUND"

"DO NO OCCUPY THE PEOPLE'S BURIAL GROUND"

"DO VACATE FROM OUR BURIAL GROUND"

The situation reached a point where a Tamil Aurovilian was called in to negotiate. Well practiced in the role of cultural broker between Auroville and surrounding populations, he realized the inflammatory potential of the circumstances and lobbied with the Waves residents to reconsider their project. The group offered to concede to the villagers a large parcel at one side of the plot to continue their rites. The villagers did not agree, however, and continued to use the center of the plot for their purposes. Finally, further negotiation ended in the erection of flimsy fence to demarcate the area where the rites take place from the Auroville residences. No further solution has been proposed for the moment.

In hearing about the events I was struck by Waves as an almost textbook case of European expansion. Dennis Cosgrove argues that the concept of "wilderness" went hand in hand with European colonization, referring to places untouched by the culminating stage of social evolution, namely European civilization. As such a direct connection was forged between spaces of nature and
non-Europeans, since both were thought to live in a similar position outside and prior to modernity and the transformative impulse of European culture (1995). At Waves, the attitude was much the same. White settlers, motivated by a utilitarian outlook on land use and propelled by a fervent belief in their right to manifest their vision of destiny, moved onto the scene, began using the sacred spaces of native people, and figured that those people would give up and get over it. The area at the beach was configured as a kind of wilderness, meaning that it was yet untouched by the Aurovilian agenda – which in this case could be read as a European emperium, as no non-European Aurovilians were involved in the project. Projecting a classic colonial vision, the Waves settlers perceived both the natural site and the non-European people occupying it as existing outside of or before the modern, progressive and transformative presence of Auroville. Their project sought to establish a space of reason and order on the border of a region of chaos, violence, and primitiveness. The venues for performance and visual art they sought to create linked the territory to ideas of urbanity and high culture, which stood in sharp contrast to the performance space of popular, funerary rites. The legitimacy of the Aurovilians’ practices lay in the redemption of the liminal, dark realm of death through the enlightening principles of beauty and spirituality.

Located on the border of the community of Auroville, Waves was literally a boundary between purity and danger, the experience of which took on surreal

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dimensions. The spectacle and olfactory impact of the funeral pyres at the
doorstep recalled what Michael Taussig identifies as the “psychedelic veil” of
colonial perception (1986). The strange mix of fear, repulsion, and yet intimate
connection with death were the landmarks in the imagined geography of the Waves
project. The residents of this geography attempted to domesticate the threat of the
flames under the term “bonfire,” with all the cheery and leisure-time implications
such a word has in a beach setting, although certainly not etymologically!

It is important to note that while Waves sought legitimacy in a wider culture
of belief sustained by the community’s script, namely that Aurovilians are
manifesting “the city the earth needs,” many Aurovilians I spoke with about the
project condemned it on the grounds that it constituted a serious disregard for the
needs and wishes of local people. Some even used the term “colonial” or “racist”
to critique Wave’s encroachments. Of course, Waves was an exception, as few
efforts to manifest the community’s destiny so blatantly provoke conflicts of
interest. Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that the injustices of the racialization
of Tamil village people and the spatial hierarchies of Auroville-village relations are
topics that cause great concern for many Aurovilians.

A sense that Auroville’s development should unfold in harmony with
village people, however, also entails a complicated mix of assumptions.
Stereotypes and idealized visions form the basis for a range of logics at the service of efforts to manifest the community’s destiny.

One of the more colorful narratives I encountered was the story of the Irumbai temple. Irumbai, one of the villages positioned at the edge of Auroville, is home to an unusual temple. It is unusual because it is one of the oldest in the immediate vicinity and even bears inscriptions that attest to royal patronage. While the temple continues to be in use, with a Brahman priest arriving once daily in the evening hours to officiate puja, it is also an archaeological site and has received visits from both Indian and foreign scholars. The importance of Irumbai in the context of Auroville has been propagated by one of the community’s more public figures, Sundari, a Tamil brahman woman. Sundari is one of a handful of Tamil Aurovilians who do not hail from a local village. Born in Madurai, she is highly educated, has won prizes for her Tamil poetry, and is married to a European man. From Auroville’s early years she has been heavily involved with creating educational and vocational programs for village youth and adults, with many graduates going on to eventually become Aurovilians. In accordance with her work and service, Sundari is regarded by many as an expert on local village dynamics and is frequently asked to speak on the topic of Auroville-Tamil relations.

On at least a couple of occasions during public meetings I heard her make reference to an ancient myth about Irumbai, a story that according to some Tamil
Aurovilians, Sundari has been circulating for several years. The tale is basically that long, long ago, the famous Saivite sage, Kaluveli Siddhar, arrived in the area and began meditating under a tree, long enough for a great anthill to grow around him. So great was his penance, that it created a heat so intense that no rains came. The area's residents suffered from a great drought. Still no one dared disturb him. The situation was brought to the attention of the King of the area, who recruited Valli, a court dancer and devotee of Shiva, to assist. Valli noticed that periodically in his meditation, the saint would reach out his hands to catch one of the falling leaves from the peepal tree under which he sat and eat them. She seized on the clever idea of frying some *applalam* (a salty chip-like snack made of lentil flour) and placing them in his outstretched hands. Her plan succeeded; Kaluveli Siddhar began eating and so regained his taste and physical connection to the world around him. After some time he grew fat and the anthill that surrounded him broke apart. Disturbed by the sun, he opened his eyes one day and was pleased to see Valli dancing for him. His penance ended! He accompanied Valli to her home where she continued to dance and sing for him. With the heat of his yogic practice abated, rain began to fall once again to everyone's relief. To celebrate, the King held a big *puja* at the Irumbai Temple (the very same still standing on Auroville's outskirts). At the end of the ceremony, Valli would dance a piece that showed the *tandava*, the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. During the dance, as can sometimes
happen, Valli lost an anklet. Kaluveli Siddhar, whose divine vision caused him to actually see Lord Shiva dancing within her, rushed to pick up the anklet and tie it again on her feet. Everyone in attendance immediately laughed uproariously, jeering and insulting the sage for touching a dancing girl. Humiliated and furious, Kaluveli Siddhar in a fit of anger requested Lord Shiva to come out of the temple and prove his innocence by sending down a rain of stones. The Lord always protects his devotees. Immediately, the temple lingam exploded, sending stones flying every which way. Where they touched the ground, the earth was immediately scorched. Craters appeared in the desolate landscape. Nothing would grow. Horrified and truly sorry, the King threw himself at Kaluveli Siddhar’s feet to beg forgiveness. The sage softened somewhat. He told the King that unfortunately, what was done was done. However, things would not always be this way. In the distant future, with the arrival of people from very far off lands, water would return and with it trees and abundant crops.

The significance of the story works on multiple levels. In the most obvious sense there is an endeavor to explain and legitimize the Auroville experiment with its influx of Westerners in relation to local history. This history is both mythological and historical, as Sundari claims that her version of the tale is not a contemporary fabrication but part of the repertory of regional folklore. Popularizing the story creates a sense of history; like the efforts of nations to appeal
to a great and immemorial past, one of the strategies through which the Auroville
community is imagined is to invent cultural representations which ground present
day identities, and the futures these identities envision, in the authenticity of a
primordial, geographically situated past. One is reminded of Bhabha’s
commentary, “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the mists of time and
only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye” (1991:1). This backwards and
forwards looking nature of Aurovilian communal identity involves the creation and
transformation of Tamil oral history at the service of contemporary, localized
globalization. Thus, the retelling of the Irumbai legend constitutes not only an
invention of tradition, but also a re-invention of the traditions of native others
whose role in the present is essential for the ultimate realization of the future. The
move is contradictory not only in its relation to time, but also in its
conceptualization of the relationships between people.

On the one hand, the arrival of Aurovilians is seen as an inevitable outcome
of past local events, giving such people a sense of place and belonging. On the
other, their presence is configured as constituting a radical change in eco-historical
circumstances. Their link to reforestation and the renewed productive capacities of
the earth is a marker of social difference constituted in racial terms: “white people”
are the embodiments of progress, while native inhabitants of the region are
associated with an inhospitable and degraded past (see Figure 34).
Figure 34: Views of Auroville's reforestation
Photo from brochure and from Auroville Master Plan

Auroville
the
Greening
of a
Wasteland
Viewed in relation to the context of its re-tellings, the story emerges as all the more complex. Performed periodically by a charismatic Tamil woman during public meetings attended primarily by white Aurovilians, the Irumbai tale serves as a reminder of the importance of the relationship between Auroville and local village communities. It also reinforces the social political hierarchies presently in force, but under increasing pressure from a resurgent "brown" India. In an environment in which few people speak Tamil or have much knowledge or interest in Tamil practices, forging a link between Auroville and Tamil cultural heritage actually becomes a political statement that aims to insert local people into the Aurovilian public sphere. A story that writes Auroville into local folklore is a gesture that inscribes village people into the history of Auroville, even if as a backward "other." The fact that the statement is made by an individual who within local systems of categorization is radically different in terms of caste and class from those she sets out to represent, however, is in and of itself contradictory.

While the recipient of much respect, Sundari as a figure occupies an ambivalent status in the minds of at least some Tamil Aurovilians who view her more public pronouncements as efforts to consolidate her own position and make way for her idiosyncratic vision of the role of Tamil culture in the life of Auroville. Several people I spoke with viewed the Irumbai story, for example, with a sense of amused irony. They saw this version of the myth as being a creation authored by
Sundari herself to present to the uninformed, European Aurovilian audience as an ancient, cultural justification of white Aurovilians, who are the story’s protagonists.

What the Irumbai story, with its affirmation of the foreign presence in Auroville as a fulfillment of a local myth, and the Waves project, with its blatant disregard for village practices, have in common is a belief in the transformational mandate of Auroville. The myth and the Waves project are examples of the community’s belief in its own manifest destiny. Both revolve around narrative practices that position Aurovilians as makers of progress and impel them to set about re-fashioning the world around them. Although in very different ways, both scenarios rely on relegating local Tamils as primordial and passive. It is clear that it is the Aurovilians who are the agents of change, while the role of village people is to either acquiesce or to cooperate.

Not all essentialist versions of Tamils are negative, however, or position them as the needy recipients of Aurovilian upliftment. In fact, frequently representations of them are celebratory, underscoring the simple beauty of some cultural practices, the innate spiritual nature of individuals, and the beguiling mystery and pageantry with which that spiritual nature sometimes manifests. Here the Orientalist pendulum swings the opposite way, as Indian culture and people are perceived as mystical and enlightened in ways that confound the Western, rational mind.
The clearest formulation of the impulse to see local people in these terms was related to me when I interviewed a long-time, educated North Indian Aurovilian in 2000 about the relationship between Auroville and Indian culture at large. She advanced the view that India is far more than the outer, material forms of its myriad cultures and people. The true spirit of India lies in an inner dimension, which in her view was something that local village people clearly embodied. Her explanation touches on so many themes that I have chosen to reproduce it here at length:

RAJIKA: You see the village has nothing. This is true purely on an external level. They lack resources, toilet, hygiene, health and education. They lack everything and we have all of them. So we have to give it to them. But you never give without taking something. The villagers have something to give us too. They have the sense of being connected to the eternal spirit, which is direct, which has nothing to do with their outer education. Precisely because they didn’t get an education. They were not infected by the Macaulian disease that we, urban, educated, neat Indians are infected by. They are closer to their roots and their roots for millennia are to understand the inner spirit of things. They had that. They can teach that to the Aurovilians [...] They represent an inner learning for us [...] Initially everybody [Aurovilians] with their Christian background came to ‘uplift.’ Who is uplifting who? Because the Westerners were the barbarians. They still are in terms of an inner culture. They have no inner culture. Even now any skin curls with this barbarism, this economic barbarism that the Indians are now infected with totally. Indians are becoming barbaric too. In spirit we are not. In spirit we are a highly developed culture. We have lost it. We are losing it because we are worshipping the stuff that comes to us from the outside, because we don’t value ourselves (2000).

This presents a very different image of village culture from that of the Irumbai myth. While still primordial, Tamil people are no longer seen as in need of
modern progress, but rather as inherently superior to the Western and Westernized Indian "barbarians." What the Tamilians lack in material resources and the "disease" of education, they more than make up for by their connection to the "eternal truths" that represent the highest dimensions of India’s inwardly superior culture. Interestingly, the specifics of regional culture, expounded upon in the myth that closely identifies events with particular, local places, are eclipsed in this narrative by a nationalist view of India that amalgamates the country’s ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and class diversity into a single unit. Local people are less the producers of rural, Tamil culture, and more the representatives of a pan-Indian essence. The nationalist view is further consolidated by the speaker in forming a dichotomy between that pan-Indian essence and "the stuff that comes to us from outside."

Another vivid example of the celebratory, spiritual mode of seeing local Tamil people appears in an issue of the internationally circulated monthly newsletter, AV Today (Mauna 2001: 8). Under the column heading, "Auroville and India," is a first-person account written by a Dutch Aurovilian woman of an annual festival that takes place in the Tamil month of Masi (February-March, roughly). The festival, which at its height involves processions through the streets of numerous local deities to the ocean where they are given a ritual bath, is usually celebrated in a big way in the Pondicherry area. Although temple processions take
place on almost any day of the week, nothing else on the calendar really compares
with the color and fanfare of the simultaneous parade of so many deities, some
carried considerable distances, to and from the sea. Although observed at many
levels of society, the holiday in its most publicly elaborate forms is primarily a
popular festival in which many rural and lower class urban segments of the
population take part. Masimagam festival is not an event that would affect the
routines of most Aurovilians, unless they traveled to Pondicherry on that day and
found themselves amidst the bustle and stand-still traffic.

The writer of the article is caught in this very situation. She relates that it is
7 p.m. and she is trying to drive home from Pondicherry but cannot. Looking
around through the sea of vehicles, she is bedazzled by the lights, cacophony, and
splendor of the slow approach of the richly adorned parading deities and their
accompanying musical ensembles. So enchanting and moving is the sight, that she
has a kind of epiphany in which she concludes, “...this is instant, i-n-s-t-a-n-t
India.” The poetic, vivid description of the event and the writer’s appraisal is one
that most non-Indian readers, myself included, would probably immediately
understand; the intensity of visual culture and the multitudinous chaos that
organizes social life are two things that most visitors to India are immediately
struck by. What is noteworthy in the comment is the snapshot-like way in which
the writer experiences the particular moment.

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Entering into contact with Indian culture through moments of pageantry or ritual has long constituted one of the privileged fields of inquiry for scholars of India, harkening back to Singer’s formulation “cultural performances” (1972). The Auroville writer perceives the event as a kind of encapsulation of the most salient features of Indian culture, namely “chaos and oneness” and “natural devotion and love.” It is as if these most distinctive and therefore significant elements of culture are suddenly sucked up together from the diffuse, routine of everyday life and put on display. In this case the performance triggers a deep realization on the part of the viewer that she is in India, although she has been living in India for years.

The next sentence is all the more thought provoking. The writer states: “All these different beings moving in one throng, millimeter by millimeter, and I feel completely at home.” The singularity of the moment, which produces wonder and an acute realization of cultural particularity, is now domesticated as the viewer finds herself completely at ease. She identifies herself with the others stuck in traffic around her, referring to one as a “neighbor” and stating, “We’re just hanging here together.” As for the meaning that these familiar others attribute to this “psychedelic happening,” she states that “Nobody really knows why and nobody really cares, and I don’t either.” Here she superimposes her own awe and bewilderment onto the festival’s native, motorized participants, converting herself.
into a cultural insider by assuming that there are shared modes of viewing and understanding.

This appraisal of India, as simultaneously strangely exotic and yet reassuringly familiar, is a theme that emerged time and time again as I spoke to Aurovilians and visitors to Auroville who had been traveling throughout India. In the words of Shelly, a young, British Newcomer, “The moment I landed up here I felt like it [India] was like no other place I had ever been and I immediately felt at home.” This sense of “home” is not based upon the familiarity with language, knowledge of ways of doing things or occupying a role within local social networks that individuals probably feel at least to some extent in their countries of origin. On the contrary, it relies upon a structure of feeling in which the speaker is the sole arbiter of what things mean. Operating from a latitude of freedom, the speaker exercises a great deal of agency in declaring who she is and to what she belongs, modes of identity formation which are more products of her own cultural upbringing than they are of the environment around her, in which social affiliations are largely ascribed by birth.

The final paragraph of the article is equally insightful. The writer relates that she returns home “marveling at this amazing arrangement that Auroville, City of the Future, is coming forth in the midst of this god-loving mass. OF COURSE it is!” Here she jumps from the individual to the communal level, commenting upon
both the remarkable uniqueness of Auroville’s location and the seemingly obvious logic of it. The community is construed as a kind of island separate from that which surrounds it, and yet connected with it on some deep spiritual level. This move exemplifies a common process of producing a sense of place through the selective observation of and identification with elements of surrounding Tamil culture. The Aurovilian experience of community would seem for at least some Aurovilians to be dependent upon the availability of a smorgasbord of local cultural elements that residents partake of as per their appetites.

Yet even as they position themselves as those who are able to pick and choose at will, they confound rigid boundaries of social difference and similarity. The idea of the boundary has been a central organizing idea for many studies about community and identity. As put forth by the oft-cited Gupta and Ferguson:

Community is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and construction of otherness. This fact is absolutely central […] for it is precisely through processes of exclusion and othering that both collective and individual subjects are formed. With respect to locality as well, at issue is not simply that one is located in a certain place but that the particular place is set apart from and opposed to other places (1997: 13).

In contrast, in the case at hand, symbolic boundaries are readily identifiable only in some respects. Clearly Auroville is defined as very different from the world that surrounds it, but at the same time it is perceived to share some fundamental similarity with local culture.
The imagination of a sense of community, therefore, is not so much based upon the construction of a clearly excluded other, but rather upon the formulation of both difference and common essences. Standing at the boundary, as in the case of the writer who is caught in the traffic between Auroville and Pondicherry, produces not simply an awareness of distinct cultural entities, but a strong emotional feeling of relatedness and the perception that the two entities are inextricably linked. Evidence that this position is legible to others is the fact that the article appears in *AV Today*, a journal wherein the editors carefully select material that they believe is relevant to the Aurovilian experience and of interest to outside observers of the community.

To conclude, many popularly and publicly circulated narratives flatten the complexity of identities and relationships. Stereotypes and tropes, which harbor centuries-old modes of viewing India, eclipse from view the deep contradictions of the realities of both local people and Aurovilians themselves. Both condemning and celebratory depictions present simple dichotomies that produce essentialisms articulated through race, class and gender. At the same time these depictions deconstruct rigid boundaries, implying that the inside and outside of Auroville are deeply connected. The picture that emerges, whether painted in hues of fascination or disregard, is one of ambiguity.
Interventions

The ambiguity and stereotypic nature of the perceptions that many Aurovilians have about local Tamil people stands in contrast with the efforts that still other members of the community have made from the earliest days to cooperate with village inhabitants, involving them in reforestation efforts and allowing them to benefit from economic and educational resources. Often such involvements are not cast in cultural terms. Very few of even the longest standing Western Aurovilians are conversant in Tamil, creating a tremendous linguistic separation for which immigrant groups to many other countries would be sharply criticized. Perhaps even more surprising, relatively few Aurovilians express much interest in cultural practices of the region, including for the wealth of “high cultural” arts such as music and dance to be found in abundance in nearby Chennai. With the exception of some occasional programs of children’s dance, events showcasing local and visiting artists of either classical or folk traditions are few. Although some of the community’s own Tamil residents have for years discussed the aspiration for a Tamil heritage center, to date no substantive efforts either to construct a facility or to organize regular cultural programs or workshops have materialized.

One noteworthy exception took place during my stay in Auroville in 2001. Three long time Aurovilians hailing from Australia, Britain, and France created a
traveling theater production in collaboration with a traditional shadow puppeteer. They named the show the “Vandi Theater” after the bullock cart which transported the actors and props to villages in and around Auroville. This production took a comic look at the Aurovilian experience, highlighting the ineptness and stupidity with which foreigners attempt to manage life in India. Staged with simple homemade costumes and sets, the acted scenes were interspersed with a shadow puppet play, featuring traditional puppet characters as well as puppets that resembled the live characters. The puppets, cast on a screen at center stage, spoke in Tamil in the funny, guttural shouts the puppeteer gave them. The live actors spoke a mix of simple English and even simpler Tamil. The basic story outlined the foolish troubles of a velakaran (white person) whose adventures include daily mishaps such as bicycle scrapes or the complete inability to use local tools. His escapades also entail grander adventures of miscommunication, including one that lands him as an unknowing bridegroom. Throughout, he is guided by a patient Tamil man (played by one of the three white Aurovilians), who does his best to instruct, as well as rescue him.

As such, the Vandi Theater ironically elaborated upon the innumerable ways in which Aurovilians are dependent upon and indebted to local people. When I spoke with John, one of the play's producers and actors, I asked what the intention had been. He stated that it had been quite obvious to the team that
Auroville had not yet done enough in the way of establishing open dialogue with surrounding communities. This, he asserted, led to constant misunderstandings on all sides.

JOHN: This is their place after all. Velakarans came here knowing nothing. They even had to show us how to use a mumpti [a particularly shaped gardening shovel]. But we don’t communicate with them, and when we do it is always on our terms. And we are trying to approach them — using the Tamil language and shadow puppets and all — rather than make them have to walk the distance towards us. Also, theater is more universal. Everyone can laugh at the Vandi Theater, whether they are Tamil or a velakaran (2000).

When I saw the show at one of its performances in the immediate Auroville vicinity, the audience, made up primarily of villagers — many of whom were children — indeed laughed uproariously throughout, particularly in the slap-stick humor scenes. The Tamil Aurovilians I spoke with about the show expressed their approval as well, commending the producers for their novel attempt at reaching out to village populations.

Although I could not help wondering whether in dramatizing stereotypes the production reified them all the more, the show certainly stood in contrast with other more one-sided representations of Auroville-village relations. While other community members might recognize the dependency and complexity of the situation, the Vandi Theater was unique in attempting to communicate this through vernacular language and performance practices to which most non-Tamil
Aurovilians might not attribute much value. Moreover, the show portrayed Auroville in ways that undermined an image of its superiority. It dramatized the dependency and even vulnerability of its residents.

Another interesting attempt at restructuring the terms of Auroville-village representations is “From a Villager’s Point of View,” a 35-minute video created in 2000 by Raman, a long-time Tamil Aurovilian. The video, to my knowledge, is one of the only instances of Tamil Aurovilian cultural production aimed at creating a space for village voices to express their views on Auroville. The film basically consists of a string of excerpts from on-camera interviews with citizens of a few of the surrounding villages. The interviews, conducted in Tamil with Raman, whose image does not appear, are loosely translated in subtitles. The voice of an American man relates the occasional narrative, clarifying that the film’s primary audience is “long-term Aurovilians” who have “gained insight” into local cultures. As such, the introduction is a bit of a misrepresentation as the film goes on to present villagers’ perceptions of how life in Auroville has changed over time and the varying effects that Auroville has had on life in different villages. Many points of view are juxtaposed. For example, the reactions of citizens of Kuilapalayam are different from those of Kottakarai. While the informants from the former seem quick to affirm the material benefits, citizens of Kottakarai voice disillusionment.

11 Raman was also the video’s producer. It was distributed only within Auroville.
over the fact that while 75% of village lands were sold to Auroville, the community did not provide the expected level of subsequent support to the village. With respect to how Auroville has changed over time, the film presents the consistent viewpoint that whereas living was much simpler in the early days, today residents are more interested in business and personal gain.

The film’s underlying message, that Auroville should consider local people’s wishes as well as opinions, is clear. Although lacking narrative focus, Raman successfully manages to establish that people living in the area are insightful spectators of, more than participants in, the unfolding of Auroville. Local Tamilians have observed the community’s dramas and developments at close-range over a long period of time. What is not made explicit, yet surfaces in the interviews, is that Tamil village populations also perceive Auroville-Tamil relations in overly-simplified terms and in ways that seek to consolidate their own interests. The image of the generic passive or primordial villager is contradicted as people, with viewpoints and visions of their own, speak directly at the camera. The film is thus an important intervention as it seeks to democratize channels of communication and promotes the possibility of two-way dialogue. The fact that the film’s creator is a Tamil Aurovilian is also significant, as relatively few Tamil people are involved in communal activities, governance or any activity in Auroville’s evolving public sphere.
To conclude, the importance of village populations to the concrete and symbolic manifestation of Auroville is beyond doubt. All of the foregoing examples suggest that Tamil people constitute a constant point of reference for Aurovilians in thinking about the community, although individuals view the relationship in very different ways. Representations frequently rely on stereotypes that either create sharp contrasts or affirm deep connections. Some construct an image of villagers as primitives in order to bolster Auroville’s evolutionary mandate. Others celebrate local people and their practices as embodiments of a spiritual essence that ties them intimately to the community’s spirit. There are some representations, however, that seek to express the complexity of the Auroville-village relations. Drawing attention to the mutual dependency of the populations, such representations seek to expand the range of admissible voices in the ongoing formulation of Auroville’s identity. Like other aspects of life in the community, the wide range of perspectives and the ambiguity of complex social relations make the ideal collective envisioned in Auroville’s script deeply contradictory in its performance in everyday life.
Auroville and Indian Nationalism

While on an everyday basis many Aurovilians come into contact with elements of Indian culture through interactions with local Tamil residents and workers, many are also engaged in processes of interpretation of broader Indian cultural currents and political developments. This takes many forms, including interest in Hindu philosophical texts, reading newspapers and staying up-to-date with events, or active involvement in negotiations with national government officials. Much of this contact arises from the great importance that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother gave to India in their writings. On an institutional level, taking the wider world of Indian society and government into account has become a necessary task in ensuring the community’s development.

Several Aurovilians are actively engaged in researching and interpreting Indian cultural elements that they then incorporate into their own productions. These productions assume forms in the visual and performing arts, literature and architecture. What is of particular interest to me, however, are those works and creations that – consciously or unwittingly – sit uneasily alongside the efforts of a powerful and vocal minority in contemporary India who are concerned with promoting particular religious visions of India’s cultural heritage. The context for this is easily established by the spin that some people inside Auroville and in India at large have put onto Sri Aurobindo’s writings about Indian tradition and the
Indian nation. In focusing on these I do not wish to create a view that Aurovilians see India in fanatical Hindu terms. In the discussion that follows I allude to events and productions in which most Aurovilians did not participate. Such instances are of interest, however, as some of these representations of India have gained the attention of certain national leaders and have served to create a base of support for Auroville amongst currently influential scholars and bureaucrats.

*Sri Aurobindo's Nationalism*

The Aurovilian promoters of certain representations of India seek their inspiration in a series of texts written by Sri Aurobindo in support of India's independence. From 1902-1910 Sri Aurobindo was wholeheartedly involved both behind the scenes and then overtly in the independence movement, most significantly in Bengal as the editor of a seditious newspaper, *Vande Mataram* (*Victory to the Motherland*), funded by the newly founded nationalist political party. Sri Aurobindo’s stance was not one of reconciliation; his goal was

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12 Dates and details of Sri Aurobindo’s life are published in multiple sources. These dates here correspond to an official Ashram publication (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust 1983), cross-checked with the scholarly bibliography Heehs 1989. Eventually in May 1908 Sri Aurobindo was arrested on charges of conspiracy in an assassination case. During his one-year detainment in prison while under trial, the inward turn his life had already begun taking intensified. He had transformative spiritual experiences and began to explore other modes of consciousness with great energy. By the time he was acquitted and released in May 1909, the party
complete independence at a time when other leaders were willing to negotiate only partial self-rule.

Because of his bold stance, Sri Aurobindo is very much a national hero in India to the present day. Part of his ongoing currency stems from the fact that he left behind a body of inspiring literature, written primarily in English. His revolutionary spirit infused numerous articles on Indian culture, in which he probed topics as diverse as dharma, the caste system, the visual arts, Vedic philosophy and beyond.

At the core of these works is a view of Indian civilization that embraces spirituality – defined far more broadly than brahmanical ritual – as the nation’s essential motivating force. According to Sri Aurobindo, it is a “spiritual aim” that imposes on Indian culture “all the rich and luxuriant variety of its forms and rhythms that gives to it its unique character” (1970a: 121). The full glory of this aim was not manifest in the present, however. In fact, Sri Aurobindo perceived that Indian civilization had long strayed from its originating impulse. According to Sri Aurobindo, the decay manifest in a decline in the vitality of Indian creativity, a cessation of free and critical intellectual activity, and social conditions in which organization was broken. Sri Aurobindo continued his efforts for about one more year until in 1910 he received an inner command and withdrew suddenly from public life just as authorities had launched another effort to capture and prosecute him. In April he traveled to Pondicherry, where the French offered some Indian revolutionaries an uneasy protection against their rivals, the British.
authority and rule had become rigidly despotic. Interestingly, these processes began long before British colonialism. Moreover, despite whatever destruction the British Empire brought about, the encounter also revived dormant intellectual and creative impulses and awoke the nation to a sense of its past.\footnote{Sri Aurobindo postulates that it was at a moment of decay and helplessness from causes internal and external that “the European wave swept over India” (1997c:14). This move first threatened to destroy what India itself no longer had the power to live. It then impelled activity “crudely and confusedly imitative of the foreign culture” (15). Yet, “for whatever temporary rotting and destruction this crude impact of European life and culture has caused, it gave three needed impulses. It revived the dormant intellectual and critical impulse; it rehabilitated life and awakened the desire of new creation; it put the reviving Indian spirit face to face with novel conditions and ideals and the urgent necessity of understanding, assimilating and conquering them. The national mind turned a new eye on its past culture, reawoke to its sense and import, but also, at the same time, saw it in relation to modern knowledge and ideas. Out of this awakening vision and impulse the Indian renaissance is arising, and that must determine its future tendency (15).}

In his revolutionary writings, Sri Aurobindo calls for a full scale cultural, political, economic – and at the root of all three – spiritual revival in India. This “renaissance” is to come about through the simultaneous rediscovery of the past and the creative free invention of new forms to embody India’s essential spirit.

The specifics of Sri Aurobindo’s vision aside, he is hardly alone in joining nationalist sentiment with a spiritualized view of India. Most notably the sage Vivekananda (1863-1902), who was the disciple of the great Ramakrishna and who traveled to the United States as an early ambassador of Indian religion, and the founding father of modern India, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), both used...
notions of Indian mysticism and universalistic Hinduism as a call to Indians to unite and as concepts to be mobilized against colonialism. What is fascinating about such perceptions is that they imply the transformation of colonial stereotypes into tools for resistance.

The stereotype of India as the representative of the "mystic East" has its roots in a long history of Orientalist scholarship based on certain Judeo-Christian understandings of religion, as well as interactions with brahmanical pundits (King 1999). As suggested by Said (1991), such ideas constitute the framework by which Western academic accounts of the nature of the "Orient" are complicit with the hegemonic political agenda of Western imperialism.\(^{14}\) The reconfiguration of these concepts into an explicitly anti-colonial stance, on the part of Sri Aurobindo and others, however, adds a layer of complexity not always addressed in accounts of "Orientalism."\(^{15}\) As King points out, "What is interesting about the "mystical" or "spiritual" emphasis that predominates in the romanticist conception of India is not just that it has become a prevalent theme in contemporary Western images of India,

\(^{14}\) Said develops his thesis in the context of historical studies of the Muslim cultures of the Middle East, and not with respect to imperial interactions with the rest of Asia.

\(^{15}\) Said's critics have pointed out that his account of Orientalism views natives as passive (Parry 1992; O'Hanlon 1989). In a clear counter example for India, Fox traces the ways in which Sikh reformers of the 1920s both accepted colonial stereotypes and simultaneously mobilized such images in the creation of a mass opposition movement against the British (1992).
but also that it has exerted a great deal of influence upon the self-awareness of the very Indians that it purports to describe” (1999: 92).

Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” conveys the ambivalence of colonial discourses and the ways in which it can be subject to multiple agendas. Within this framework, appropriating stereotypes can figure in a cultural resistance based on mimicry and parody (1985). Sri Aurobindo is of particular interest in this regard as he was reflexive about this process and sought to distance himself from Judeo-Christian versions of “mysticism.” The glorious past and bright future he envisioned for India bore little resemblance to the “other worldly,” private and

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16 While scholars might be quick to assert Sri Aurobindo’s role in the construction of modern, universalistic ideas about Hinduism (King 1999), his writings attest to his being aware of the power of Orientalist constructions. His collection of essays, known together as the Renaissance in India (1997c), is a good example. The essays were written in his journal the Arya from 1918-1920, but were published together in a booklet in 1920. Sri Aurobindo wrote, “European writers, struck by the general metaphysical bent of the Indian mind, by its strong religious instincts and religious idealism, by its other-worldliness, are inclined to write as if this were all the Indian spirit. An abstract, metaphysical, religious mind, overpowered by the sense of the infinite, not apt for life, dreamy, unpractical, turning away from life and action as Maya, this, they said, is India; and for a time Indians in this, as in other matters, submissively echoed their new Western teachers and masters. They learned to speak with pride of their metaphysics, of their literature, of their religion, but in all else they were content to be learners and imitators. Since then Europe has discovered that there was too an Indian art of remarkable power and beauty; but the rest of what India meant it has hardly at all seen. But meanwhile the Indian mind began to emancipate itself and to look upon its past with a clear and self-discerning eye, and it very soon discovered that it had been misled into an entirely false self-view” (5-6).
apolitical spirituality conceived by other foreign or Indian religious scholars and practitioners.

While Sri Aurobindo exemplifies the ambivalence of colonial fabrications, his work is also testimony of the ambivalence of strategies of resistance. At issue, as throughout this dissertation, is that the meaning an author invests in a text is as significant as the historical framework that situates the text and the interpretations that various actors with varying agendas bring to it. Specifically, nationalist literature written in the colonial moment can be made relevant towards very different ends in the context of post-independence nationalism.

**Hindu Nationalist Appropriation of Sri Aurobindo**

It is perhaps not so surprising that current forces of religious nationalism in India have put the figure and writings of Sri Aurobindo at their own service. Like the movements of Sri Aurobindo’s own day, contemporary organizations such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have formulated a view of the nation expressed in opposition to “foreign” cultural influences.\(^{17}\) In constructing simplistic — but dangerous — “insider” “outsider”

\(^{17}\) Months before completion of this dissertation, the BJP, which was India’s ruling party since 1998, lost in a surprising election that re-instated to power India’s long-standing, moderate party, Congress, under rule of Sonia Gandhi. The local Pondicherry region voted Congress along with the rest of the country. As is usually
binaries, such forces have engineered a perspective on Indian culture that relies on archaic images to portray the promise of the future.\(^{18}\) Sri Aurobindo’s poetic praise of the “Indian spirit” is easily recontextualized to support contemporary essentialisms, particularly because of his reliance on a spiritual view of history, in addition to his wish that Indian spirituality meet up with modern material development. Also of interest for current agendas is Sri Aurobindo’s belief that India, once revitalized through its rediscovery of itself, had an indispensable role to play in the future of humanity. This aspiration provides gravity for the BJP’s stake in portraying itself as cosmopolitan, not to mention its leaders’ support for India’s participation in global markets and technology.\(^{19}\) One significant difference, however, is the fact that Sri Aurobindo never sought to align his vision with a

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the case, the local candidates receive backing through a coalition of central and state political parties, in this case the Tamil Nadu parties DMK and PMK. Shortly after the elections, the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry, N.N. Jha, resigned amidst controversies about his BJP leanings.

\(^{18}\) The manipulation of images of the past to paint the horizon of the future is a classic, contradictory, nationalist strategy. As put forth by Kandiyoti, “[Nationalism] presents itself both as a modern project that melts and transforms traditional attachments in favour of new identities and a presumed communal past” (1991: 431).

\(^{19}\) In seeking to join Hindu cultural sentiment with ideas about cutting-edge technology, extreme Hindu nationalists have promoted versions of ancient India as more technologically advanced than the present era, arguing that India had spacecraft, nuclear power, and cloning. Such arguments are put forth even from respected scholars at reputable institutions (see The Deccan Herald 2000 and The Hindu 2002, 2000.)

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definition of “Hinduism.” In fact, throughout his writings he condemned “religion” and dogma.

In spite of basic differences, however, several contemporary national leaders and intellectuals have cited Sri Aurobindo to further their own ends. There are numerous, recent examples. They build upon a longer history of religious nationalist appropriation of Sri Aurobindo. An early but significant instance comes from Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, the former chief of the RSS. The RSS might best be defined as a cultural organization dedicated to the promotion of “Hindutva,” a slippery term which broadly or narrowly connotes a purportedly Hindu/universal view of human society. Many major proponents of this ethos on the contemporary scene see it as the true culture of the Indian people. The RSS is a tricky outfit; while openly involved in fanning the flames of communalism, in addition to promoting censorship, the RSS has “kept away from direct entry into politics, preferring to practice it by remote control” (Vyas 2000). Involved in the formation of the Jan Sangh political party and its later incarnation the BJP, the RSS’s leaders frequently interact with the party’s leaders and are in on political negotiations. Several of the top-brass of the BJP are themselves RSS products.

Golwalkar, the RSS’s second chief, was a Sri Aurobindo fan. According to one of the most comprehensive investigations of the history of the modern Hindu nationalist movement by Christophe Jaffrelot (1998), Golwalkar was also a public
admirer of Hitler, whose love for his nation and discipline, it seems, were akin to Golwalkar’s own (64). An article in the National Guardian from December 10, 1950, written on the occasion of Sri Aurobindo’s passing, documents Golwalkar as stating, “Though Maharshi Aurobindo is no longer in our midst in the physical form, I hope the spirit of the Maharshi will always be beside us and prevent our countrymen from misleading themselves and being misled after any false and new idea.” So great is Golwalkar’s respect for the divine authority of Sri Aurobindo that he asserts, “I do not mourn his passing away for persons of his type, as the Vedas say, do not die.”

A couple decades later, Golwalkar’s admiration for Sri Aurobindo had not waned. In a 1972 pamphlet on the occasion of Sri Aurobindo’s birth centenary, Golwalkar broadly outlines Sri Aurobindo’s biography before probing into his supposed belief in a Hindu nation. Later, Golwalkar states, “One whom now-a-days we formally call a Hindu has within him an image of Divine Mother India” (9). A few sentences afterwards, he implies that non-Hindus are not patriotic, asserting, “There are millions of masses who are not called Hindus, they have to be given the realization of Mother India and made to stand beside us as our comrades in her worship” (10).

Skipping ahead in time, in a posting to a conservative Hindu website on September 30, 2002, Balbir K. Punj, an elected member of India’s Rajya Sabha and
convenor of the BJP’s think-tank, responded to a series of critical essays in the left-leaning journal Outlook. The issue, entitled, “The Crisis in Hinduism” (see Mehta 2002), was dedicated primarily to probing the cultural dynamics of India’s growing Hindu nationalist movement. Attacking the journal’s rehashing of the “clichés and half-truths” that he claimed have always characterized the critiques of Hinduism put forth by Indian Marxists, Punj went on to tout the glories of Hinduism’s tolerance. He stated that “Hindutva” was at the heart of India’s freedom movement. From here Punj goes on to claim that Sri Aurobindo, among other leaders, “overtly subscribed” to Hindutva. Punj is apparently unaware of the fact that the term was coined only in the 1920s, a decade or so after Sri Aurobindo’s political activities and writings were committed. Moreover, Sri Aurobindo, Punj claims, had nothing good to say about Islam. He concludes stating, “We are a secular and plural society because of our Hindu character and we need Hindutva to project it.”

Such examples of appropriation of Sri Aurobindo into religious nationalist rhetoric can be found locally in Pondicherry as well. One day in January 2001 I picked up a leaflet off the ground near Auroville (see Figure 35). The leaflet gives details of an upcoming meeting of a local chapter of the RSS. The RSS was founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. Hedgewar participated in anti-British agitations, although the RSS never joined any independence struggles. As
Figure 35: RSS Pondicherry meeting invitation, January 2001
Image found on the ground in Auroville
the two were contemporaries, Hedgewar and Sri Aurobindo knew of one another, although, there was never much contact between them. The leaflet brushes aside any such historical nuances, however. The backside of the brochure features an illustration of Sri Aurobindo and Dr. Hedgewar sitting together in a private indoor meeting. The Tamil caption reads, “The flourishing of spirituality for the growth of the nation: Dr. Hedgevar and Sri Aurobindo meeting together at Pondicherry, September 1920.”

When I showed the pamphlet to historian Peter Heehs, the person who has most intensively studied Sri Aurobindo in historical context, he immediately recognized it as a reference to a photograph taken of a meeting between Sri Aurobindo and Dr. Balkrishna Shivram Moonje, a nationalist from Nagpur. Moonje and his entourage had come to Pondicherry to repeat in person their earlier request that Sri Aurobindo head the newly proposed National Congress, an offer that Sri Aurobindo declined. The exact date of the meeting is not known, but it most likely occurred sometime shortly after September 19, 1920. Records indicate that Hedgevar had been among Moonje’s entourage, although it was not he who met with Sri Aurobindo. Capitalizing upon Hedgevar’s mere presence at the time and place, the creators of the leaflet have reconfigured the facts to suit their own ends. To galvanize interest in the region, a Pondicherry chapter of the RSS has
sought to align itself with the historical import and spiritual authority of both a
nationally and locally significant figure.

Most significantly, however, contemporary political forces at the national
level have mobilized the symbol of Sri Aurobindo in very public forums.
Numerous top-brass BJP leaders, including former Prime Minister Vajpayee, and
former Ministers L.K. Advani and Murali Manohar Joshi, have made highly
publicized visits to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. More telling is former Prime
Minister Vajpayee’s controversial speech from Goa for New Year 2003. Vajpayee
called for a “true understanding of Hindutva which is forward looking.” In a dig at
the Congress Party and the Left, Vajpayee asserted that Hindutva was wrongly
pitted against secularism. He argued that “Hinduism’s acceptance of the diversity
of faiths is the central feature of secularism in India.” At this crucial point in the
speech, Vajpayee cited “Maharishi Aurobindo” as saying, “Indian religion has
always felt that since the minds, the temperaments and the intellectual affinities of
men are unlimited in their variety, a perfect liberty of thought and of worship must
be allowed to the individual in his approach to the Infinite” (Vajpayee 2003).

The next day, BJP spokesperson, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, said Hindutva was
"the culture of this country," although when questioned as to the discrepancy
between the fact that India was thousands of years old while “Hindutva” was
coined only in the 1920s, he could not give a clear answer. He also made the claim
that "cultural nationalism" was the same as the secularism defined in the Constitution, but did not respond as to whether that "cultural nationalism" was the same as that "cultural nationalism" promoted by former RSS chief, M.S. Golwalkar. Even as Naqvi stood and made the claim that Hindutva would "liberate Muslims and other minorities from being second class citizens," the Uttar Pradesh President of the BJP promoted the Hindutva theme as well, but by stating that Muslims should give back to Hindus the Varanasi and Mathura mosques adjacent to the Vishwanath and Krishna temples (The Hindu 2003b). A couple days later the confusion mounted as former RSS chief, Prof. Rajendra Singh, attacked the conventional definition of secularism on the grounds that it was a distorted understanding of "dharma," which he stated enjoyed a higher status than "religion." Expressing satisfaction over Vajpayee's Goa musings on the subject, Singh then equated Hindutva and secularism with Hinduism and Indianness, adding "therefore, Hindutva and Indianness mean one and the same thing. Hindu dharma is Manav dharma" (as quoted in The Hindu 2003a).

It is into this dangerous and tricky game of religious and political wordplay that conservative politicians and scholars have introduced pre-Independence thinkers such as Sri Aurobindo with no acknowledgement of the changing historical circumstances or consequences. Sri Aurobindo deplored the colonial way of writing about India and in order to break these assumptions employed an
opposite strategy of arguing for the superiority of Indian culture. This move enabled him to formulate a revolutionary consciousness. As argued by Peter Heehs, "One of the ways the nationalists asserted their claim of cultural and political autonomy was by deliberately reversing the terms of orientalist discourse" (2003: 180).

This is not to turn a blind eye to the fact that Sri Aurobindo did construct a series of essentialisms that could not withstand current historical or anthropological interrogation into the complexity, heterogeneity and contradictory nature of social relations in India. What is certain, however, is that those essentialisms are today translated into terms defined by contemporary political agendas that bear little resemblance to the vision of Sri Aurobindo. A close examination of his texts indicates an inclusive view of Indian spirituality (that includes Islam, for example) and discredits any effort towards religious syndicalism for political ends.

Moreover, while he was committed to the idea of India as spiritual leader for the whole word, he argued against “vulgar and unthinking cultural Chauvinism which holds that whatever we have is good for us because it is Indian or even that whatever is in India is best because it is the creation of the Rishis” (as quoted in Heehs 2003: 188). The many differences between Sri Aurobindo’s actual thought and the ethos to which he is falsely made to ascribe by others is a rich topic in and of itself, which is beyond the scope of consideration here. It is important to note,
however, that it is not only religious nationalists who make false statements about Sri Aurobindo, but Marxist and postcolonial scholars and Dalit activists as well.20

Producing Nationalism in Auroville

Ironically, some foreign Aurovilians have produced materials that resonate with certain essentialist versions of Indian culture being produced by contemporary nationalist forces. Inspired by Sri Aurobindo’s perceptions and hopes, and

20 Among the scholars who cite the writings of Sri Aurobindo as foundations for the modern Hindu national view of Indian civilization and politics are historian Prasenjit Duara (1991), psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1993) and anthropologist Peter Van der Veer (1999). According to Peter Heehs, contemporary scholarly interpretations often rely upon decontextualized readings and misquotations of Sri Aurobindo’s writings (2003, 1998). With respect to the relationship between Hinduism and Islam, Sri Aurobindo saw the dynamic interaction between the two traditions as productive, stating that it could lead to “a greater spiritual principle and formation which could reconcile the two or a political patriotism surmounting the religious struggle and uniting the two communities” (1997c: 442). Furthermore, he indicated that the Indian spirit was not exclusive, but rather beyond the limited dogma of any single religion: “Nor does spirituality mean the moulding of the whole type of the national being to suit the limited dogmas, forms, tenets of a particular religion, as was often enough attempted by the old societies, an idea which still persists in many minds by the power of old mental habit and association; clearly, such an attempt would be impossible, even if it were desirable, in a country full of the most diverse religious opinions and harboring too three such distinct general forms as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, to say nothing of the numerous special forms to which each of these has given birth. Spirituality is much wider than any particular religion, and in the larger ideas of it that are now coming on us even the greatest religion becomes no more than a broad sect or branch of the one universal religion” (33). As for Dalit activists, the radical organization, Dalitstan, calls Sri Aurobindo a “fascist Aryan Hindu fundamentalist, who practiced fraud on a mass-scale and insulted the Indigenous Sudra race.” The organization does not delve into Sri Aurobindo’s own writings, but relies on statements about him made by one Dr. Abraham T. Kovoor. See Muniappan 2004.
motivated by their own discoveries of Indian culture, a handful of residents working in different media have created a view of India that emphasizes the glory of its past and suggests that an understanding of the nation’s true spiritual “genius” should temper current modernizing forces. Some of these materials get circulated outside Auroville with an eye towards actively promoting such a view amongst the Indian public at large.

Two examples are of particular interest. First are the writings of Francois Gautier, a long-time Aurovilian who spent many years traveling around India as a journalist, most notably for the French daily, *Le Figaro*. I had heard of Gautier through friends in Auroville, one of whom jokingly referred to him as “our resident Hindu fanatic.” In fact, a few people mentioned the concern that Auroville would be associated with the viewpoints that Gautier had expressed in public forums both in and out of India.

Gautier does not make any attempt to cloak his views on particular topics. In a published interview in 2000, he described Ayodhya as “a nearly total Hindu city where the mosque seemed totally incongruous,” praised former Prime Minister Vajpayee as “a man of substance when you meet him,” and mentioned that when he had met BJP and RSS leaders for the first time some twenty years ago, he “discovered that not only did some of the things they said make sense, but also that Sri Aurobindo had uttered some of those things 70 or 80
years earlier" (*Golden Chain* 2000). Gautier's belief in the greatness of Indian
culture is also obvious, surfacing in statements on the order of describing
kalaripayattu, the martial art form of Kerala, as "the most extraordinary martial art
in the world (17).

Gautier's recent publication by Auroville Press, *India's Self Denial* (2001),
gives a sense of his message. The Auroville Press prints Auroville brochures and
internal materials. It also prints a series of books called *Collection Vande
Mataram*, which is dedicated to making "known a number of texts inspired by a
similar vision of a new India." The perspective of this collection makes it attractive
to religious nationalist exponents. Evidence for this is the fact that one of the
books in its series, *Sri Aurobindo and Indian Civilization* (1999), written by
Frenchman, Michel Danino, was reviewed extensively and highly favorably in the
RSS organ, the *Organiser* (Krishnan 2000).

Gautier's book is framed as an answer to a question that appears in the
introductory Publisher's Note: "Why is it that Indians, particularly the elite — the
intelligentsia, the journalists, the writers, the top bureaucrats, the diplomats — hold
an image of themselves which is often negative and have a tendency to run down
their own country?" Gautier's basic argument is that Indians must look at modern
problems in light of both an accurate view of history as well as India's original,
spiritual genius. Only in overcoming the negative self-image can India again
manifest its spiritual "Wonder" and "restore to the world its true sense, to recharge humanity with the real meaning and spirit of life, to gift to this dolorous planet That which is beyond mind: the Supra-Mental" (2001: 65). It is Gautier’s belief that Indians wrongly entertain a series of myths about themselves that colonizers, the foreign press, and their own intellectuals have promoted. Among the many myths he attempts to debunk are the idea that Aryans invaded India, that the whole of India is caught in a quagmire of poverty, and that caste in its origins was a degrading system. He also sets out to right supposedly wrongful views of the level of atrocities committed by Muslim invaders.

With respect to the latter, Gautier is most adamant, if historically imprecise. Citing a historian’s (published by a nonacademic press) citation of an estimate by a Professor K.S. Lal, Gautier states that the Hindu population decreased by 80 million between 1000 and 1525, thereby constituting “probably the biggest holocaust in the world’s history.” The legacy of this horror lives on, although the British and later Indian Marxists negated the event’s occurrence:

This genocide is still a reality which should not be wished away. For what the Muslims invasions have done to India is to instill terror in the Hindu collective psyche, which still lingers many centuries later and triggers unconscious reactions. The paranoia displayed today by Indians, their indiscipline, their lack of charity for their own brethren, the abject disregard of their environment, are a direct consequence of these invasions. What India has to do today, is to look squarely at the facts pertaining to these invasions and come to terms with them, without any spirit of vengeance, so as to regain a little bit of self-pride. It would also help the Muslim
community of India to acknowledge these horrors, which paradoxically were committed against them, as they are the Hindus who were then converted by force, their women raped, their children taken into slavery – even though today they have made theirs the religion which their ancestors once hated (33-34).

Gautier does not specify the exact dates of the supposed invasion, leaving to the side that Muslims came to India at different times in its history, with different purposes and to varied effects. Finally, he does not concede that many Hindu

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21 The first Islamic proponents were holy men, who reconfigured elements of Vedanta in the creation of a mystical spiritual practice known as Sufism. Sufism rose as early as the 8th century C.E., but was strengthened in the 12th and 13th centuries. Many Sufi shrines continue to be popular destination of pilgrimage for Hindus and Muslims alike to the present day. In contrast, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (979-1030 C.E.) launched a series of devastating attacks on temples and cities to establish a hold in Punjab. The people he represented, the Turkic people of Central Asia, were themselves new converts to Islam. Nomadic for much of their history, these people were upwardly mobile. It was not the Sultan’s Islam that motivated him, but his thirst for riches and political power. It is to be noted that some scholars assert that for 200 years Mahmud’s descendants held at bay attacks from the Mongols, who successfully battered China, Persia and parts of Russia (Mansingh 1998). Amongst the Mughal rulers, there were vast differences in policy and approach towards India’s indigenous populations, making it impossible to impose such general conclusions about the entire empire. For example, the reign of Akbar (1542-1605 C.E.) is generally conceded to represent the height of the Mughal era in terms of the unprecedented peace, prosperity and syncretic cultural production that flourished. Akbar showed his tolerance towards other faiths by marrying the daughter of the Rajput king, Raja of Amber, among other Rajput marriage alliances. These women, who became the mothers of Mughals, did not convert to Islam and were allowed to continue Hindu practices. Akbar lifted bans on temple building and pilgrimage. A fond lover of debate, his court became a center for animated intellectual and religious discussion. Finally, as an avid patron, he promoted the visual and musical arts. His descendent, Aurangzeb (1618-1707) was another story. In sharp contrast with his grandfather, Aurangzeb was a ruthless tyrant, and an ineffective administrator. Hindus were hardly his sole targets.

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converted to Islam (and Christianity) in order to escape the hells imposed upon them by the ways in which the system of caste was practiced. Nevertheless, important details aside, Gautier’s main purpose is to make the point that a good share of contemporary problems, and Indians’ inability to deal with them, are the effects of murderous events that he asserts took place 1,000 years ago.

While Gautier is clear that things cannot be sorted out through violent means, it would be difficult for many people not to view his remarks as inflammatory, especially given the fact that he makes conclusions based on minimal and highly contested evidence. Moreover, he wipes away current antagonisms almost implying that they too are a fiction created by Indian journalists and scholars:

It is thus a bit of a paradox today to hear Indian intellectuals claim that Hindus are intolerant, fanatic, or ‘fundamentalists.’ Because in the whole history of India, Hindus have not only shown that they are extremely tolerant, but Hinduism is probably the only religion in the world which never tried to convert others (35).

Here again, Gautier refrains from any complex view of history. He makes no reference to the expansion of Hinduism to the courts of Bali, Java, Sumatra, the

Determined to gain the throne, he killed his brothers and their sons, and imprisoned his father. An extremely orthodox Sunni, he abolished the practice of ceremonies or music throughout his kingdom and destroyed numerous temples. Dedicating himself primarily to the task of suppressing the rebellions that sprung up from under him, he depleted resources and morale. In his memory he left few glorious buildings or monuments.
Philippines and Vietnam from the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. He does not consider the spread of Hinduism’s offshoot, Buddhism, outside India at that time either. It can be argued that Buddhism was a proselytizing religion, in as much among its stronger tenets was that people donate to the welfare of others. Within this rubric, the highest benefit accrued from donating to specifically to the Buddhist monastery. As for recent history, Gautier seeks to deny well-documented Hindu involvement in communal violence, by instead citing minor examples of how, he asserts, the press has misrepresented incidents.

To meet Gautier in person, however, is even more intriguing. When I interviewed him in 2000, the encounter was not at all as I naively expected it to be. To my surprise, and at odds with the rhetoric in his published writings, his position seemed subtler. Gautier portrayed himself as a foreigner who knew India intimately as a result of his years of travel in rural areas. This “first hand” knowledge became the platform from which he evaluated the authority and position of both Western scholars, and residents of Auroville alike. Both, according to him, held distorted views which were the product of isolation and failure to engage closely with a world they were too quick to issue negative pronouncements about. In the case of scholars, Gautier alleged that most were not “involved in India.” He gave the example of the Western scholars of Sanskrit language he had observed at a conference in Pondicherry once, saying that few actually spoke or “lived” Sanskrit

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since their phenomenological or impartial points of view prevented them from seeing the language in the context of its indivisible relationship to religious practice. Similarly, foreign Aurovilians did not “interact” with India, because of their own cultural biases. In particular, many Aurovilians had a “blockage” against spirituality:

GAUTIER: There is a Western fear of the outer forms of spirituality, such as the collective meditations and prayers and pujas. Until there is an opening for this, I don’t think that Auroville can really know India, interact with India and become part.

On the one hand, I was struck by how Gautier’s critique gained legitimacy in relation to what has long been the standard ethnographic strategy for creating authority, namely emphasizing the experiential aspect of fieldwork. As argued by James Clifford (1988) in his analysis of the construction of the ethnographic text, anthropological scholarship has traditionally deployed a kind of “been there and done that” tactic for substantiating textual claims. Gautier did the same, mentioning his direct contact with the people (rural populations indeed being the historically privileged ethnographic subject) as the basis for his authority in describing their culture. With the point about the Sanskritists, Gautier undermined the textualist bias of the study of Indian language and religion, suggesting instead that examining texts in relation to performance practices would allow scholars to come to terms with the dynamism of culture. With this he made a kind of
“anthropology” over “comparative literature” argument. Finally, in asserting that Auroville is an “island,” Gautier critiqued what he identified as a Western superiority complex. In its place he promoted a need for increased cultural understanding, what has been a motivating force for American anthropologists, from Boas onwards.22

On the other hand, sharply at odds with current post-structuralist scholarship, Gautier seemed to see India in monolithic terms, as a fixed and knowable identity. In this view India’s true essence is spirituality and specifically “Hindu” philosophy and practice. This core identity is constituted as existing outside the stream of heterogeneous and contradictory social relations and multicultural elements. Furthermore, this essence exists whether or not Indians themselves are aware of it. In fact, many members of the nation are not, according to Gautier. Thus, India should reawaken cultural pride, which in this argument is synonymous with Hindu pride.

A similar ethos stood at the heart of another production in Auroville the Genius of India. Originally conceived as an exhibition, in 2000 it was made into a slideshow that toured major cities and also the elite prep-school in Dehradun and the JJ School of the Arts in Bombay. Later in June 2001 it was released in CD

22 For the development of the idea of cultural difference, the need for knowledge about and sympathy towards cultural others and the contributions of Franz Boas to this ethos, see Stocking 1974.
format for general distribution. The project was conceived by a small group of French Aurovilians running the Auroville Press, the same press that printed Gautier’s book. The group selected passages drawn from Sri Aurobindo’s collection of essays published under the title *The Renaissance in India* in which he lays out the challenge for India in assuming its true destiny. In exhibition format the text excerpts appear on scrolls, each hanging alongside images from the photographic repertoire of a member of the group. In the show version, the text becomes the voice over read by a collage of voices and interspersed with chanting and sonorous music of the likes of the violinist L. Subramaniam. The visuals include a host of images including close-up shots of bronze sculptures in the Chola-style, temples, the faces of children and an old sadhu (renunciate). Sometimes images fade from one to another as when the face of a dark Kali in a classical painting gradually transforms into a galactic view of a nebula. There are some moving images as well, such as that of a young bharatanatyam dancer and a woman creating a traditional *kolam* design in white powder on the ground. As I learned during interviews with two of the creators, Michelle and Andre, the team selected these images more for their suggestive powers and to create an “atmosphere,” as opposed to their being illustrative of any specific textual content (see Figure 36).

When I inquired in 2001 about the motivations of the group who created the project, I was told unequivocally that they had aspired to promote Sri Aurobindo’s

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Figure 36: Views from the *Genius of India*
Screen capture from June 2001 CD
ideas to audiences that they felt could benefit greatly from exposure to material 
that portrayed Indian culture in a positive and profound light. In part, they seemed 
to have in mind that the text’s promotion was an effective strategy in the important 
task of debunking negative stereotypes of India abroad:

MICHELLE: People when they speak of India are always speaking about 
the same thing – poverty and corruption. But they don’t know really what 
is India. So it [the presentation] is a way of talking to try to say, ‘No, India 
is much more than this. It has a very ancient past, a very ancient culture, 
and so on.’ So Sri Aurobindo’s text is a way to show really what is the 
genius of India.

Like Gautier, the group consciously saw their work in part as a response to a 
historical trajectory of Western representations of India. The partiality and 
inaccuracy of these representations was something to be countered if India was to 
play its crucial role in the destiny of all humankind. Only by revealing the true 
spirit of India, as embodied in the words of Sri Aurobindo, could the negativity be 
overcome. This “really what is the genius of India” was not to be found in the 
flow of heterogeneous social relations, but in a timeless essence that emphasized an 
original and glorious spiritual consciousness. The aim of shifting focus from the 
contingent to the transcendent did not constitute a denial of the reality of current 
conditions. It was an attempt to contextualize whatever was at odds with India’s 
philosophical and contemplative traditions. But this attitude also harmonized 
nicely (if unintentionally) with Orientalist opinions that India “once was” a “great
civilization” that in more recent times had declined. The project’s goal was to help India regain its former glory.

Interestingly, the group perceived that it was not only, or even mainly, foreigners who needed to learn about India. Indians themselves needed to be educated about the value of Indian culture. Andre stated, “Even here in India there are many people who don’t know so much what is India, even the Indian people.” The creators saw this cultural ignorance as largely the effect of intensifying and accelerating modernization marked by mimicry of the West. Being Westerners themselves, they felt qualified to comment upon these processes as their outsider status made them all the more aware of what was at stake.

ANDRE: I discovered with a fresh eye what is India at the age of 30 or 28 and for this it is probably much easier for me to recognize certain things than some people who have been born here. The fact is that when we come [to] a country that we don’t know, we are going to be seeing many things that we never thought about before and this gives some power to the seeing.

Similar to what surfaced in the interview with Gautier, there is an element of the ethnographic. One is almost reminded of the grand (and sometimes grandiose) anthropologist, Malinowski, who set forth into what was in the early 20th century regarded as the unknown on a journey to the heart of culture. Malinowski, who propelled anthropology out of the armchair, firmly believed that the anthropological project was to discover the “native point of view,” in terms so

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detailed and scientific, that it exceeded what natives knew about their own people. Working from a basis that mixed experiential empiricism with intuition, the *Genius of India* team too believed in the power of seeing things with new eyes, as if the act of viewing were somehow disengaged from the a priori conceptual frameworks of their own cultural position.

Painting “India” in terms of its differences with the West, the creators of the *Genius of India* spoke from a position of loss.

MICHELLE: Coming from the West we are maybe more acutely aware of what a loss it would be if the Indian civilization would not exist anymore. What we call Indian civilization are those qualities that Sri Aurobindo speaks about. Because we know what is the world outside, we know how it is. There are many interesting things and all that but it does not satisfy your hunger, your inner hunger. Sri Aurobindo says that it would be a tragic irony if India were to throw away her spiritual heritage at a time when other people, and in a way we are part of this other people, are increasingly turning toward her for spiritual guidance. So, we are the category of those others who are turning towards her so if that India would disappear, it would be tragic for India, but it would be maybe even more tragic for people like us.

The objectives of the exhibit echoed in new form the fundaments of the romanticist visions of India. As put forth by Inden (1990), romanticist representations of India relied on a conception of its culture seen as Europe’s opposite. While more positivist or utilitarian outlooks experienced India as disgusting or deluded in

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23 For further discussion of Malinowski and the relationship between anthropological and “native” knowledge, see Stocking 1989.
24 See James Clifford 1988 and Clifford and Marcus 1986 for discussion of the “objective” and empirical construction of authority in classical ethnographic texts.
relation to Europe, the romanticists celebrated India as the repository of a more pure human essence that European civilization had adulterated and lost along its way towards rational progress.\(^{25}\)

The fear of loss of India is based upon a view of India that recasts cultural specifics into a universal, humanist perspective. India is the heritage of all humankind.

MICHELLE: When you are born in a country like France, and I believe it would be the same in America, you really see that something is lacking, something really essential, and this thing is connected with spirituality, or I would say the soul, something that is really the being of our being, and when you come here, you can see sometimes that this is something much more present here than abroad. I don’t know, we feel that India has a really

\(^{25}\) This history of the importance that concepts about India have had for Europe’s own identity has been thoroughly documented by Wilhelm Halbfass (1988), who argues that India, constructed by Enlightenment thinkers as a kind of primordially pure consciousness, served as a critique against Christianity. This notion of India as critique was expanded upon by the Romantic Movement, in which ideas about the purity and primitiveness of India were offered as a barometer against which to measure Europe’s progress and contemporary problems. As such, India was imbued with epic qualities and came to be enshrouded in an air of mystery. A view of India as mythic and irrational was, according to Ronald Inden, common to what constituted two co-existing discourses on India, the positivist and the romantic (1990). Unlike the romantics, however, who celebrated India as “the lost paradise of all religions and philosophies” (Halbfass 1988: 72), the positivists declared Indian civilization and culture to be backwards, deluded, and disgusting (Inden 1990: 66-9). Similarly, a mythological conception of India can similarly be found in American thought, beginning with Whitman’s poem, “Passage to India,” and the works of Emerson and Thoreau, all of who celebrated the richness of Indian philosophy and Hinduism’s ideas about a more transcendent reality underlying material existence. This lineage of thought directly inspired some of the epic beliefs about India that resurfaced during the 1960s hippie movement (Stephens 1998: 55).
important role to play in the future, because India has had continuously for the past 5,000 years this deep spirituality and it has probably been preserved not only for India, but for the world as a whole. This is what Sri Aurobindo was talking about.

One of the more intriguing dimensions of the project was that the creators demonstrated their own premise. In interpreting and presenting an Indian text for Indian audiences, they exemplified the ways in which culture is not inextricably tied either to geography or to discrete social groups. They were producing Indian culture even as they identified it as something independent of themselves that they sought to rescue and promote.

What complicated the project still further was that the kind of education its creators promoted dovetailed with efforts on the part of some Indians as well. Debate over the content of school curriculum has intensified in India since the mid-1990s as a vocal minority of politicians and scholars has pushed for the promotion of particular views of Indian culture and history. The debate centers largely around questions of what constitutes “Indian” culture and to what extent ideas about spirituality – as stated in Vedic, Brahmanic, and Hindu philosophical texts – should be included in what is supposed to constitute a “secular” curriculum.

Several instances have ensued. During 2001, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) sought changes for the National Curriculum Framework for School Education that involved new guidelines for
textbooks and serious deletions from those currently in use without author permission or much parliamentary debate. The move, in the view of critics, constituted an effort to "construct a pan-Indian identity, traced to Vedic civilization, subverting the country's pluralist traditions" (Ananth 2001). At issue were unscientifically substantiated claims about the link between Aryan Vedic society and the Indus Valley Civilizations, as well as deleting any detailed delineations of the caste system and "communalizing" historical events. Other similar educational inroads on the part of nationalist forces included introducing courses of study in astrology and Vedic mathematics. Finally, the government has intensified controls placed upon academics – foreign or Indian – requiring long approval processes for independent research and even academic conferences. The situation has alarmed many scholars, even as others have aligned themselves with the new nationalist agenda. For example at end of 2002, the Indian History Congress established a committee to examine the National Council of Educational Research and Training's new text books for grade levels 6, 9, and 11. The Congress took the decision based on fears over the NCERT's departure from a secular approach, as manifested by a lack of impartiality when dealing with questions of religious, linguistic, or cultural "traditions" (The Hindu 2003c).

Sympathetic with the move across India to infuse curriculum with spirituality is Kireet Joshi, Chair of the Auroville Foundation 1999-2004. As I
have asserted in Chapter 3, Joshi was and is a powerful man, both in Auroville and on the Indian political scene. He has always taken a keen interest in matters of education, directing the Ashram School under the Mother, serving in Indira Gandhi’s Human Resource Development Ministry, and seeking important government funds for educational projects in Auroville during 2002-3.

Joshi’s stand on education is basically that it should uplift humanity. To this end, specifically the Vedas and Upanishads contain a treasure of knowledge that can develop the mind. He is committed to a spiritual view of India that is Hindu in orientation, yet counts Auroville as an important experiment that is moving humanity towards a new spiritualized society. This aligns Joshi closely with the Mother’s vision that Auroville had to be located in India, which I mention at the outset of this chapter. It is an idea that Joshi expounds upon frequently in his public speaking engagements in the community.

All of these ideas took center stage at a December 2002 conference, organized by Joshi and a handful of Aurovilians. Entitled, “The Sense of the Infinite,” the stipulated aim of the event was to brainstorm the ways that sections from Sri Aurobindo’s *The Renaissance in India* could enlighten the creation of a multimedia exhibit on Indian history and culture. This exhibition was to be a

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separate project from the *Genius of India* slideshow. From what I gathered it was conceived in a much more ambitious fashion, as something that would integrate state of the art technology and exhibition know-how, into a trenchant artistic, scholarly and spiritual investigation of India’s past, present and future. While the *Genius of India* show had toured to select locations in India, what was envisioned now was something that could attract a much wider audience at large venues throughout the country.

A friend involved in planning the conference thought I might be interested in participating. She invited me to one of the event’s planning sessions at which noted scholar Kapila Vatsyayan was guest of honor. Enthusiasm ran high among some of the attendees, who tossed around the names of top-notch scholars, famous artists and noted critics as possible invitees. The group also discussed a variety of formats for the event, as the idea was not to expound on themes, but engage in a dialogue and delineate concrete possibilities for materializing an exhibit.

In the days following the planning meeting, the organizers decided to structure the conference around a series of sessions, each devoted to a particular excerpt from the *Renaissance in India*. The underlying theme was to examine how India’s great spirit of the past could be rediscovered and put at the service of the country’s future. Thus, the first session, “Overview: the Essentials of the Indian Spirit,” delved into what constituted that former glory. The selected excerpt from
Sri Aurobindo began with, "Spirituality is indeed the master-key of the Indian mind; the sense of the infinite is native to it." To orient the discussion, a group came up with questions, which were to shape each panelist's take on the passage. The first session included questions such as, "What is this ancient 'soul of India'?" and "In the context of the new worldviews proposed by science today and the seeking for new paradigms, are these affirmations not of great significance?" The following three sessions were to be dedicated to "India's Work for the Future." Each session had its own corresponding text and questions. Each member of the panel of speakers would have fifteen minutes to speak on the topic. An "anchor" for the panel would then broker written questions to the speakers from the audience.

At this time, important dimensions of the conference took shape. Kireet Joshi announced that Murli Manohar Joshi (not a relative, but bearing the same name), the BJP nominated Minister of Human Resource Development, Science, and Technology, was going to visit Auroville, his arrival coinciding with the finale of the conference. Rumors circulated around Auroville in some circles. Some people I heard talk felt that it was a positive sign for the future development of Auroville that such a heavyweight politician should pay a visit. Others were more skeptical, feeling strongly that the whole conference had been merely a ploy on the
part of Kireet Joshi to showcase the arrival of a dignitary and thereby promote his own agendas.

A few people I spoke with, who knew something about M.M. Joshi's political affiliations, were outright alarmed. A physicist by profession, M.M. Joshi is an RSS product. He served in the capacity of a pracharak leader and General Secretary of the organization before entering politics. As a politician, he had ascended to office by election only once in 1977 when he was made member of the Lok Sabha. When the right-wing political party the BJP was formed in 1980 he was installed as party Vice-President. Later in 1991 he served as its President. M.M. Joshi was implicated in the organization of the campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, which some Hindu leaders have asserted sits over the birthplace of the mythological hero Rama. The Ayodhya incident led to brutal Hindu-Muslim rioting that continued for months in centers in North India and claimed thousands of lives.²⁷ The Aurovilians I spoke with who knew M.M. Joshi's pedigree were very concerned about receiving him with such open arms in Auroville. They felt that the exclusive vision of India that he and his BJP party promoted had little to do with Auroville's universalist and revolutionary view of humanity and its future.

²⁷ For more information about Murli Manohar Joshi, and the events surrounding Ayodhya see Jaffrelot 1998.
On the day the sessions began, I was amazed at the event’s elaborate staging. The entrance to the large Sri Aurobindo Auditorium was decorated with a beautiful *pu kolam* (an arrangement of flowers in elaborate designs on the ground). Beautiful textiles hung as a backdrop on the stage. Each participant was given a specially printed bag with an elegantly wrapped box of incense and a folder of handmade paper-printed materials, including reprints of the *Renaissance* excerpts under consideration. Each bore the logo created for the event – an abstract, spiral image that recalled a galaxy. I had the sense that many people had come together and worked hard within a short period of time, doing their very best to ensure that the conference would be a singular event.

I felt differently about what actually happened and what was said during the sessions. In the end, most of the big names did not attend, such as the famous dancer Sonal Mansingh, Lucknow filmmaker Muzaffar Ali, Bombay journalist Anil Dharkar, or the famed Bollywood producer Gulzar. There were some dignitaries on hand, however, such as the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry, who spoke at the plenary session. As is customary at such events in India, introductions for the speakers were long and congratulatory. The panelists were equally long-winded, most going over the fifteen-minute time limit. In my view, the majority of participants did not directly address the panel themes. Instead, many expounded extemporaneously, covering a vast range of topics in the most general of terms. As
for the audience, while the event was well promoted in Auroville and Pondicherry, very few people attended. The cavernous 850-seat auditorium looked empty most of the time, as there were often only 30 or so people scattered in the first rows. This was perhaps not so surprising. The conference took place during working days and working hours, when most Aurovilians are busy. The project of an exhibition on India was not something that many people regarded as significant enough of a priority to warrant leaving other pursuits. Moreover, some Aurovilians I thought might be interested in such an event did not attend, as they anticipated the kind of long-winded speech making so common in public speaking in India.

Some of the viewpoints expressed at the conference were surprising to me. Speakers made endless reference to Indian spirituality, with no mention of Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. Non-descript and ungrounded comments were tossed around. For example, Dr. Meera Srivastava from the Department of Hindi at Allahabad University stated, “Our institutions are asymmetrical with our Indian culture.” Some statements seemed glaringly reactionary. Lt. General Ashoke Chaterjee said at the plenary session, “The army is one of India’s greatest achievements and we can learn from the discipline of the armed forces.”

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28 Extensive direct quotation from the conference was not possible as no transcripts of the proceedings were ever released. I tried in 2004 to gain access to the taped recordings, but was not successful.
The patriarchal slant of the discussion was further dramatized by the fact that women panelists did not address the plight of Indian women. The offer included instead a talk from a Delhi based singer-performer about Hindu religious conceptions of femininity. When a question came from an audience member asking panelists to comment upon what a recent daylight gang rape of a woman on a train said about modern India in light of spiritual ideals, the anchor of the panel, theater historian Bharat Gupt, brushed it aside, affirming that such questions had little to do with the conference.

I was nervous about my own participation. I was the youngest participant, the only one residing outside India, and I was uncomfortable with the implications of some of what was being said. Moreover, in the last minute shuffle of participants, I had been shifted out of the session dealing with culture and art, something I perhaps knew a bit about. I had landed up in a session that dealt with a section of text that stated with respect to India’s work for the future: “An original dealing with modern problems in the light of the Indian spirit and the endeavor to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritualized society is the third and most difficult [work].” The topic was too vast to elicit anything other than the most vague of commentary.
As the day of the conference approached, I knew that I had little of substance to offer. Be that as it may, I took my duty seriously and wrote a short piece. Part of it went like this:

If we look at the current situation in India, what we see is that in the name of some very dubious concept of “spirituality,” the problems of society are sidelined to make room for a narrow and dogmatic mindset whose ultimate motivation is to ensure its own political and economic interests. In this context I would always advocate mistrust of anyone who appropriates the name and words of Sri Aurobindo to promote either a nostalgic, overly Hindu, overly classical view of the Indian past, or a rigid, exclusive, religious, and frankly, totally boring perspective on India’s future.

At the end of the session (no questions were directed to me), I was amazed when a few members of the audience approached me and congratulated me for being so “courageous.” A French Aurovilian giggled that I had neatly “dropped a bomb” with my presentation, while a few young Indians who had come from Pondy praised me for “honoring tradition” without kowtowing to authority.

Such comments seemed at odds with my presentation. What I had said could not have been more general (fitting in with the overall vagueness of most of the discussants). My criticism was mild and couched in innocuous terms. I was careful not to direct my remarks at particular individuals. I was embarrassed by how my timidity and lack of intellectual experience had prevented me from intervening in any substantive way. That someone regarded the content of my presentation as bold spoke only of the limited range of viewpoints present.
As I discussed the event with my Aurovillian friends, they did not seem surprised, but rather amused. Some of the people involved, they charged, were self-promoting. The conference was a chance for people to merely hobnob with people they saw as dignitaries. This was not at all, however, the view of the conference put forth in the official *AV Today* coverage (Alan 2003b: 2). While I regarded the conference participants as representing a limited range of viewpoints and the content of most of the presentations as thin and anecdotal, the article called the panelists “eminent.” It described their reflections as “thought-provoking” and even “revealing profound depths of understanding and inner development.” The reported coverage was also highly enthusiastic about the consequences, stating that they would “play out in diverse ways and through diverse individuals and organizations over years to come.” The piece ended with a quotation from a participant: “This kind of workshop can only happen in Auroville. This is what Auroville is for.”

When I mentioned the article to Aurovillian friends, some shrugged it off, chalking it up to what they regarded as *AV Today*’s usual style of coverage. One person pointed out how the newspaper circulates widely. In light of this the editors had no option other than to affirm the conference in order to protect the best interests of the community. To be sure it is not without reason that many Aurovilians are highly aware of the need to safeguard Auroville’s public image,
both to ensure continued government support as well as avoid the possibility of unwanted government intervention.

There are certainly moments, however, when some residents feel that the community’s aims are compromised. The arrival of Minister M.M. Joshi on the final day of the conference was such a moment for those who felt most uncomfortable when the Minister toured Matrimandir – the “soul” of Auroville – with his machine-gun armed body guards in tow. But this was not the only view. The Minister was given a warm welcome, first in a meeting for conference participants only which consisted primarily of diplomatic verbal exchanges. The session was followed by an open presentation at the auditorium, which began with a showing of the *Genius of India*. The showing was well timed, as much of the final session of the conference had focused on the merits of including excerpts from *The Renaissance in India*, the text on which the *Genius of India* show was also based, in the national curriculum. After the show, the Minister delivered a speech that was later published by the Auroville Foundation. In his speech, M.M. Joshi mentioned things that he had not seen in Auroville. In other words, his speech had been written well in advance of his appearance, underscoring the usual theatrically false quality of such political events. What was surprising is that the content suggested to some Aurovilians I spoke with that Governing Board Chair Kireet Joshi was its author.
Whatever the truth of such rumors, the speech clearly sought to align Auroville with current government priorities. First of all, the Minister emphasized the “Indian” nature of Auroville’s ethos. For example, he compared Auroville’s “theme of togetherness, of unity and commonness” with “the Indian aspiration that finds its expression in the last hymn of the Rigveda” (2002: 1). Later he praised Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri as it “brings back the mantric poetry of the Vedic rishis in our own contemporary age, and it provides to the whole of humanity India’s universal message [...]” (3). Secondly, the speech forged a link between Auroville’s educational research and the Indian government’s own educational priorities:

I am sure that the Government will be happy to extend both moral and financial support to the task of educational research in which you are engaged. For the programme of your educational research is centered on education for human unity, education for integral development of personality, and education for value-orientation. Happily, all these three objectives are central to the educational policy of the Government of India, and we shall be happy to receive the benefit of your research work (3).

While it is perhaps ironic that Auroville should extend such a warm welcome to a political figure such as Murli Mannohar Joshi, it would seem equally ironic that one of the staunch voices of cultural nationalism, with all its ethnocentric and xenophobic turns and twists, should take such interest in a settlement of largely foreigners and a philosophy that is such a product of interaction with European thought. Like Auroville’s identity, the vision of India set forth by current political agendas is contradictory.
Thus, public representations and performative instances of the work of textual interpretation, bring Auroville into contact with other current visions of Indian culture. Some cultural producers see the community in relation to the broader experience of living in India and their interpretations of Sri Aurobindo are framed by their own discovery of Indian culture. This perspective, characterized by an essentialist and even nostalgic view of the nation, brings a sense of purpose, which motivates efforts to promote Sri Aurobindo’s writings to broader audiences.

To some extent, Auroville’s continued growth depends upon presenting an image that is in sync with today’s currents in Indian society, even when those currents may have implications sharply at odds with broadly accepted ideas in the community about its own goals. Philosophical interpretations must negotiate with powerful outside forces if the Mother’s script for Auroville is to be staged in current conditions. The fact that nationalist forces have recontextualized Sri Aurobindo into an icon of their own facilitates Auroville’s development and provides an arena for certain Aurovilian representations of India. Of course, at the time of completing the final draft of this dissertation, the Indian political scene had shifted. The 2004 elections ousted the BJP’s hold over the Indian Parliament, which it had maintained since 1998. In its place, power returned to the moderate, influential Congress Party. Nevertheless, the BJP and its handmaiden, the RSS, continue to yield considerable power throughout India. The currents of religious
nationalism remain very much present throughout society. Although most Aurovilians do not actively participate in these arenas and probably do not see their community as in anyway involved in Indian politics, in my view it is not possible to think of Auroville’s current public status and identity without acknowledging its complicated relation to religious and cultural nationalism.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how India – as a culture, people, and nation – plays a crucial role in the development of Auroville and in Aurovilians formulation of a community identity. I have also tried to show how Auroville is impacting India and the world-at-large. The importance of India came first from the Mother herself, who emphasized that her ideal society could only unfold in that place. Consequently, as both a geographic and cultural entity, India plays a crucial role as the chosen setting for the mise-en-scene of the Mother’s scripted vision.

Aurovilians experience Indian culture – whether in local specific forms or in a broader national context – through concrete relations, as well as abstract generalized imaginings. Their representations about their experiences or conceptualizations often mobilize classic tropes from the historical legacy of celebratory and deprecatory repertoire of visions of India. Although there are
important exceptions, many Aurovilians see India as primitive and degraded; others view the people and culture in almost epic terms, as the repository of an essential, universal spirituality. Both views provide a symbolic foundation for Auroville’s own emerging identity, either by seeing India in terms of contrast, or as something deeply connected.

Although Aurovilians may make readings of culture that serve their own objectives, they are ultimately highly dependent upon the world around them, sometimes in ways that are quite compromising. With respect to local Tamil people, the building of Auroville is dependent upon the availability of labor. Furthermore, social change in surrounding areas impacts the community, including in the form of increasing numbers of applicants and violence. As for the national level, some Aurovilians promote visions of India in sync with models of Indian culture delineated by powerful religious national leaders. Because Auroville falls under the purview of the Central Government, it is in the community’s interest to seek the favor of such ruling officials, although the implications of the rhetoric of some such people sits at odds with ideals of human unity put forth in Auroville’s script.

Auroville’s imagining of itself is thus contradictory, as are the multiple frameworks through which residents interpret and seek to perform its philosophy and goals. The ideas of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo about India have a social
life that brings them into conversation with orientalist tropes and current political agendas from both within and without the circle of readers. Although some people may conceive of the writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in terms of an unchanging truth, from the point of view of everyday life, the interpretation, representation, and practice of their teachings are entangled with the confusing ironies of present social and economic realities – all of which have implications for the staging of Auroville’s script and how participants in this grand-scale performance see themselves.
CHAPTER 7
BUILDING THE "CITY THE EARTH NEEDS"

One of the singular features of Auroville is that it constitutes an endeavor to create from the ground up an actual city. This, one could say, is the main "plot" that weaves through each scene of Auroville's performance of the Mother's vision. Referred to as the "City of the Dawn," or the "City the Earth Needs," this urban vision is born from high ideals and boldly strives to give shape to seeming impossibilities. The idea of a never-before-seen kind of a city features strongly in Aurovilians' varying perceptions about the kind of place that Auroville is and what it means to live there. Like all aspects of life, it is also a focal point for contested processes of interpreting the Mother's aspiration for Auroville. As stated aptly in *AV Today*:

"Development is controversial everywhere in the world. Managing development well means balancing the known needs of today against the uncertain needs of the long-term future: weighing-up the conflicting interests of industry, the environment, commerce and the general public. This is difficult. In Auroville, there is the added complication that we are not just building a city. We are participating in an Experiment of which the City is merely the physical manifestation. So Ideals have to be added to the scales, with their attached baggage of passionately held interpretations and irreconcilable disagreements" (Clouston 2003:4).

At issue are the tensions between deciphering the meaning of a divine vision, on the one hand, and coming to terms with current environmental, socio-economic,
and political conditions on the other. Sifting through these challenges in the course of urban planning and development means confronting the differences between a doctrinal view of the Auroville philosophy and a perspective that seeks to situate the Mother’s words within the context of the ongoing, dynamic stream of events.

In some respects one could argue that the situation at hand is hardly unique. After all, utopia is by no means new to the business of architecture and urban planning, nor is the impulse to make built forms the embodiments of divine power or social principles. That there is conflict involved is hardly singular either. As posited by Christine Boyer in her lengthy treatise on urban space and collective memory, “[T]he production of urban space is always a battlefield of contending forces, while the language of architecture and planning a struggle among waging discourses” (1996: 33). What then is unique about Auroville?

First of all, Auroville is truly a place in the making, where development presents itself as an open playing field. What is of particular interest in this regard is that while most cities have “city planners” or “managers,” in Auroville the ideal dedicated task of every citizen is to further develop the particular city that the Mother envisioned. Secondly, there is the singularity of Auroville’s publicly proclaimed ideals. All cities, and certainly planned cities, have a vision (or visions), but in Auroville the ideal is much more important to residents. It is to be a
kind of "city of God" in a totally new world. Thirdly, the challenges that Auroville faces in realizing its goals are singularly overwhelming. Creating a new world out of virtually nothing, in a land not rich in resources, seems almost impossible. The fact that such an international ensemble of people are attempting to create this new society together is also unique.

The fact that Auroville is unique makes it an interesting case study in which to examine the role of "place making" and "city making" in people's creation of a sense of identity. Much recent literature on the culture and globalization emphasizes the changing role of place in lives shaped by the disjunctive and uprooting nature of flows of people, cultures, and capital. With respect to cities, much has been written about the emergence of "postmodern" urban landscapes defined by fragmentation, privatized public space, simulated histories, and the display of consumerism – all of which are framed more by global market forces than an organic sense of locality (Boyer 1996, Davis 1990, Harvey 1989, Zukin 1991). Alternatively, there is a growing body of academic work that seeks to bring to the center of attention the "non-places" (Auge 1995) of airports, hotels, migrant

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1 Akhil Gupta argues that "the changing global configuration of postcoloniality and late capitalism have resulted in the repartitioning and reinscription of space" (2003: 321). This has had implications for imagining homelands and the nation. In a similar vein, Arjun Appadurai theorizes the condition for the demise of the nation state (1993), the production of "locality" in relation to global processes (1996) and the emergence of translocalities (2003).
detention centers, and the like. All of these studies seek to address the ways in which culture and identity are decoupled from a fixed or permanent geography.

At the same time, even as people come to view their lives in relation to multiple locations and learn how to organize their social relations along complex transnational networks, they remain committed as ever to creating a sense of belonging based upon a particular sense of place. While shared place is not a prerequisite for forging a collective identity, for some communities space is still the surface upon which a feeling that one belongs to something larger than oneself is inscribed. As argued by John Gray, “community is both process and product of place-making in which the sense of being in a group – whatever the basis of that sense, for example, shared culture, location, occupation, interest, ethnicity, national

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2 For example, in his monumental works, The Power of Identity (1997) and The Rise of the Network Society (1996), Castells addresses the virtual, fleeting spaces occupied by people as diverse as the white-collar work force employed by multinational capital and the Zapatista activists of Chiapas, Mexico who garnered international attention through their strategic use of the internet. Alternatively, James Clifford (1997) reflects upon the importance of the spaces of travel for the negotiation of culture.

3 A good case in point is Karen Fog Olwig’s exploration of the life stories of Caribbean immigrants in Great Britain (2002). She demonstrates how people’s sense of belonging is enmeshed in widely dispersed family networks where moral values, social relations, and cultural identities are continuously produced through stories shared by phone, letter and visits.

4 In a world of movement, “deterritorialized” peoples may respond by reemphasizing the importance of place in their lives. As demonstrated by Nodel Klein in Scotland, dislocating effects of global capitalism on local communities produces the persistence of a commitment to a particular place and “the continuing reference to place in assertions of a political or cultural will to distinctiveness” (1991: 501).
identity – and its place emerge simultaneously and are mutually constitutive” (2002: 40).

However, as I hope to demonstrate here, this does not imply that belonging is one dimensional or monolithic. On the contrary, as argued by Nadia Lovell, locality is multivocal and comprised of multilayered processes (1998). Aurovilians experience their belonging differently even as they participate in social processes that collectively construct the city both physically and figuratively.

Although Aurovilians talk about “Mother’s City,” or simply, “The City,” ultimately, there is no single city. Like anywhere, Auroville is envisioned, enacted, and experienced from a range of social positions and personal perspectives. Moreover, as argued by Barbara Bender, “Landscapes can never stay still – feelings and engagement with place and landscape are always in the making” (2002: 136). In other words, Auroville is experimental and open-ended. In a sense this could be said of any city. In Auroville, however, where so few parameters are fixed and where so much is left to citizens’ imagination, it constitutes a “work-in-progress” to a much greater degree. This open-ended dimension of life is also something that its citizens explicitly talk about, much more so than residents of other places.

I see Auroville’s work of place making as proceeding along three overlapping axes. These axes pertain to any urban entity, but are exceptionally consciously imagined and played out in Auroville. The first axis consists of the
social processes that shape the ongoing work of urban planning, architecture, and social and physical infrastructure. In other words, I mean the activities of everyday life that have as their aim the gradual building of a city and its cultural institutions. The second axis is the important daily work of envisioning Auroville as a city. This includes the innumerable ways in which people view their place-making activities, talk about the city and its possibilities, and represent it to themselves and others. The third axis is the multitudinous uses to which residents put particular spaces in their affirmation and contestation of the hegemonic ideas of what Auroville is meant to be.

It is at the nexus of these three intertwined spheres of human endeavor that Auroville is being put together as both an actual place and a “site,” in the sense of an image or an idea. This perspective is based upon the premise that a city is simultaneously a place and an idea about a way of life. My thinking on this topic is greatly influenced by Benedict’s Anderson’s (1983) ideas about the role of the imagination in allowing people to envision that they belong to a collective, whether it is a small, face-to-face community, or a large, impersonal nation. It defers from these ideas in as much as Anderson does not concern himself with the attachment that people feel for particular places. Moreover, the idea of the “imagination,” as he describes it, bifurcates the way people conceptualize their social bonds, from how they actually experience them in everyday life.
I am interested in the dialogical relationship between how Aurovilians imagine their city, on the one hand, and the social processes through which they actively enact and resist those ideas in the course of actually building it. My thinking along these lines is indebted to anthropologist Charles Rutheiser’s exploration (1996) of the “multiple manifestations” of the city of Atlanta. Adapting a term borrowed from Walt Disney, “imagineering,” Rutheiser emphasizes the spectacular dimension of urban progress by including in his analysis the labor of “creative specialists” who “reconfigure[d] the reputation and built form of the city” through organized promotion and advertising (4). While Rutheiser is concerned with the aggressive use of advertising, which is not so relevant in the context of the less commodified space of Auroville, the point about a city growing into being through ideational processes is well taken. At the same time, Rutheiser focuses on the socio-political forces that shape how people actually manifest visions in urban plans and construction. It is this interplay between imagining and doing that I see as the central dynamic between Auroville’s script and its performance.

As such, Auroville has something particularly in common with other futuristic, urban efforts, even with unlikely places such as Celebration, a community planned and sponsored by the Walt Disney Corporation in central Florida. Throughout the 1960s Walt Disney envisioned building a community from
scratch. Unlike the "divine anarchy" of Auroville, this community would constitute a highly ordered society. But very much like Auroville, no one there would own property and everything would be oriented towards the future. This project began as the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, which later became the EPCOT Center, an entertainment-oriented theme park within Walt Disney World in Orlando. Years after Disney's death, the Corporation which bears his name took up the task of community creating once again, incorporating Celebration in 1995. Based on the paradox of a vision for the future that relies upon nostalgia for "community" as it supposedly existed in small towns in the past, Celebration is an important example of another contemporary effort at architectural and social engineering. Although in different ways, Auroville and Celebration share a common symbolic responsibility to create an alternative space for the rest of the world to see. And like Auroville, Celebration also aims to be at least somewhat self-reliant. Most significantly, residents of the two places see their everyday lives in relation to the manifestation of their dreams. In his introduction to his book about Celebration, Andrew Ross states, "This book has a lot to do with dreams because it is about people who regularly used that term when they spoke to me and to each other about their recent lives" (1999: 1). In Auroville, people see their lives in constant reference to the Mother's Dream. Of course, Aurovilians are working towards their vision, while residents of Celebration have simply purchased...
it. Moreover, in Celebration Disney employees make most of the decisions, while in Auroville making the city is a topic of debate.\footnote{Disney Corporation stipulates precise mandates about both infrastructure and communal life. For example, to live in Celebration means to submit to rules such as that only two people can sleep in a room and a family can have only one garage sale in a year. For details about Celebration see www.celebrationfl.com.}

Aurovilians promote and refute visions of the city based upon particular readings and performances of the Mother’s ideas on the subject. Thus, I begin my analysis by examining what the Mother had to say. From here I move to looking at some of the forces and structures that give shape and direction to what has been essentially a contradictory and fragmentary process of development. Because there is much more that could be said about this than is possible within the scope of this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on one endeavor in particular, the formulation of Auroville’s “Master Plan” for urban development. From here I proceed to explore how the city is envisioned through the ways in which residents talk about it, visually represent it, and actually use its spaces. While there are organizational and institutional processes that produce and circulate more or less “official” renderings about the city, residents adapt and resist these interpretations in creating their own vernacular responses, which include the new meanings they give to particular spaces through particular ways of using them.
Auroville’s Urban Concept

Auroville is something that the Mother began to imagine decades before 1968. The ideal universal city was, as she related it, not so much a concept of her fancy or creation, as it was a place revealed to her. It was a town that in some fashion existed on other planes and awaited its time to manifest in the physical realm. Corresponding to the radical transformation of consciousness and matter that would take place when the Supramental could assume its full force on earth, Auroville – and the spirit it represented – would “descend” to manifest itself. But even before the city’s full manifestation, its coming-into-existence would exert a “Pressure from above […]” Consequently, Auroville, as conceived by many of its residents, is not something to be erected so much as it is something to be allowed to become.

The plan for this city, like its concept, was also something that the Mother perceived in her visions. For example, in 1961 she stated:

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6 As early as the mid 1930s, the Mother conceived of a model town, at that time with Sri Aurobindo living at its center (Paulette 2003: 7).
7 There are many instances in the Agenda in which the Mother speaks to Satprem about Auroville in these terms. For example, on October 25, 1967, in reporting a conversation that she had with Roger Anger, a.k.a. “the architect,” the Mother states, “When the architect was here last time, he said, ‘When is the atmosphere of Auroville going to be created? Everyone is quarreling!’ (Mother laughs) I said, ‘Yes, that’s the difficulty.’ And it goes on. But anyway there is a Pressure from above, like that, a Pressure…In so far as the formation descends to manifest itself, all the oppositions rise up, the contradictions rise up, complications come, and inwardly, one sees that they [people involved in Auroville at the time] do not understand” (AV Press n.d.: 52).

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What I myself have seen [...] was a plan that came complete in all details, but that doesn’t at all conform in spirit and consciousness with what is possible on earth now (although in its most material manifestation, the plan was based on existing terrestrial conditions). It was the idea of an ideal city, the nucleus of a small country, having only superficial and extremely limited contacts with the old world” (AV Press n.d.: 10).

Thus, the Mother herself underscored the revolutionary nature of the kind of urban center she envisioned. As the “cradle of the superman,” Auroville was the site where the eventual advent of the new, more enlightened species would emerge. Auroville would be something that no one of its participants, operating from the standard human “mental” level of consciousness, could fully grasp. Because what the Mother saw was so unlike anything that resembled a city heretofore, she often lamented the limits of language for conveying the details about its contours.

Gradually, over a period of years, the Mother set forth some of Auroville’s particulars. In 1965 she began to work actively on it, giving to Roger Anger, a French architect, the responsibility for preparing Auroville’s layout. Foremost among her guidelines was that the city should be organized into four sections – the residential, industrial, cultural and international. At Auroville’s center should stand a Pavilion of the Mother (although she did not mean herself by this, but a more universal principal) and a beautiful, silent park. She also stated that the city’s population would be 50,000.

Working on the project with his colleagues in Paris between 1966 and 1971, Anger presented to the Mother for approval a series of possible plans for the city’s
overall design. The Mother eventually endorsed what came to be referred to as the “Galaxy Plan” in reference to Auroville’s spiral galactic shape (see Figure 37).

With regard to other aspects of Auroville, the Mother mentioned these more generally, often in passing or hypothetical tone. For example, once in 1969 she stated, “I wondered if there couldn’t be a publishing house in Auroville, because Auroville is an international city and there could be an INTERNATIONAL publishing house. There would be books in all languages. It would be interesting” (AV Press n.d.: 120).

Since the founding of the community, its residents have taken into consideration both the Mother’s detailed and general statements about Auroville’s built forms and animating social life. Over time residents have also come to regard other goals not incompatible per se with any of the Mother’s directions as almost equally important. Foremost among these is the desire to make the city a model for sustainable living, seen as an extension of Mother’s desire that Auroville be “self-supporting.” This desire for an ecologically sound city is consistent with adjusting to infertile soil, lack of groundwater, and saltwater intrusion that characterize land in the region. Many people in the community are dedicated to the research and development of alternative, environmentally responsible methods of construction and energy use. As stated in an undated but recent brochure on renewable energy experiments published by Auroville’s Centre for Scientific Research (CSR):
Figure 37: Galaxy Plan
Image purchased at Auroville's Visitor Center
“Auroville works at becoming a model community that would be self supporting and use renewable energy.” Another brochure that describes the range of Auroville organized Tamil village development projects, expands this concept of being a model community of environmental and social concern in its title, “Auroville: A City Which Cares for Its Bioregion” (AV Village Action Group 1998).

While many residents believe that Auroville has a world-wide significance in this regard, some feel that the need to serve as an urban model is especially important within the context of India, which is home to some of the world’s most polluted, populated, and generally hellish cities. Illustrative of this impulse is an article from the January 2001 issue of AV Today that examined the latest international thinking about cities. Under the heading, “Can Auroville Be a Model?” the article states:

When Mother spoke of Auroville as 'the city the earth needs' it seems she was referring to the need for Auroville to spiritually embody and resonate principles of human unity and truth. Yet in terms of modern India, which contains not only some of the biggest but also some of the most polluted cities on the planet, it seems reasonable to suggest that Auroville should also find practical ways of alleviating these problems by developing practices and techniques which can be replicated in urban India” (Alan 2001: 5).

Creating such a model for India has been one of Auroville’s primary selling points in seeking government support. It is strategic that the community’s Master Plan states, “The relevance of Auroville to the country as a whole is to use all the researches carried out here diligently and with commitment, individually and
collectively, in order to raise the overall quality of life" (AV Foundation 2001: 12). To such ends various centers in Auroville conduct conferences and training about innovative building and energy use for people from all over India. In addition, Auroville has become a popular site for young architecture students to pursue internships.

Creating the City in Everyday Life

Mother's aspiration for a city, and the subsequent accompanying ideals that others have envisioned for that place, underlie innumerable aspects of daily life in Auroville. This takes place in its most obvious material form in construction. In the early days construction focused largely on establishing Matrimandir, the center of the city, an endeavor in which many Aurovilians were involved at the level of providing hard, physical labor. From all accounts the act of building together was a significant experience in people's lives. Of the several descriptions I have heard and read of that time, the following best encapsulates the spirit of that moment:

The next day there was a concreting in the afternoon. When I arrived I found an atmosphere of quietly dedicated activity in all directions. Men and women of all nationalities and ages were involved in shoveling stones, emptying cement sacks, manning the concrete mixer, pushing trolleys of concrete mix and attaching them to hoists. They communicated in a variety of languages, or silence, their smiles and integrated action often being all that was required to carry the work forward stage by stage. Everywhere there was a radiance and sense of common purpose [...] Only by everyone working together and each contributing his humble part to the whole, and doing it to the highest standards, could the Matrimandir be built. It
progressed through unity, and so to work on it was to learn the lesson of unity” (Wrey as quoted in Sullivan 1994: 122).

The collective effort of erecting Auroville’s single most important structure helped not only to manifest Auroville as a place, but also as a community based upon an ideal of global, multicultural unity. Aurovilians were creating the city, but the city in turn was summoning each of them into becoming a new kind being.

This kind of unified sense of purpose is hard to find in the early 21st century. As Auroville’s population grows and the range of activities increases, so have the number of perspectives and the potential for fragmentation and conflict. As long-time Tamil Aurovilian Kuppan told me, “Everyone wants to see their own little project done. They’re not looking at it as a whole.” It is not surprising that one can hear long-time residents lament that the days of cementing together at Matrimandir are over. As Rajika, who has been an Aurovilian for many years expressed to me once, “Sometimes you just miss the days back at the Camp [the area of worker residence around Matrimandir in the early days] when it felt like we were all in it together.”

Today very few Aurovilians actually do manual work. Tamil villagers provide most of Auroville’s physical labor. Some Aurovilians regard this situation with chagrin while others regard it as a necessity given the sheer quantity of work and the small number of Aurovilians. But whatever the attitude, the presence of a laboring underclass is consonant with how globalization works. In this perhaps
distressing sense, Auroville is very much in tune with contemporary developments worldwide. At odds with its ideals of unity, Auroville does exist as a kind of privileged, largely-Western island in a “third world” sea. One might call to mind idealistic spaces of the past, such as the glorious city of Athens, which depended upon slave labor in order to realize its perfection. Alternatively the kibbutzim of Israel stand as examples of places founded upon egalitarian principles that come to rely upon the easy availability of others, in this case Arab labor or the labor of Jews from Africa, to accomplish their aims. In other words, the deep contradiction between Auroville’s ideals and reality gives it much in common with how other visionary places have operated.

Putting the question of labor aside, how do Aurovilians involve themselves in accomplishing the goals of their utopian city? The official residents of Auroville realize the community’s ideals primarily within the spheres of design, planning, and contracting. For a community its size, with official Aurovilians liberated from manual labor, an astonishing range of activities go on at any one time. People address the many needs that any self-supporting city eventually needs to fulfill. Generally speaking, a considerable amount of research aimed at determining how the Mother would have conceptualized a project goes into any endeavor. But the Mother’s view is necessarily balanced against considering the parameters of the land available, prevailing climactic conditions, etc.
A good example is the Auroville crematorium, a project begun in 1999 by a group of residents who came together under the name, “Farewell Group.” According to an article in the August 2003 issue of *AV Today*, the group’s leader has been actively engaged in examining what the Mother said about death (Priya Sundaravalli 2003: 10). This is a complex topic in Auroville because it involves the belief that once individuals start to become “supramentalized” they may enter a state that resembles death, but which is actually only a transitory phase in which the body is being transformed. At the time of the Mother’s own death in 1973 there were devotees who believed that her body was in such a state and, therefore, should not have been immediately interred as happened. Others, who did not share this belief, were nonetheless surprised at the Mother’s passing. My advisor, Richard Schechner, who visited Auroville in 1971, told me that he remembers repeatedly hearing people say that the Mother was growing steadily younger. From what I have gathered from informal conversations over the years, in addition to what Georges Van Vrekhem has compiled about disciples views on the topic (1997: 475-510), many people were convinced that the supramental transformation of the physical plane was right around the corner. Hand in hand with that assumption was that the Mother’s body would be the first to attain supramental, immortal dimensions, something that she herself said she was working towards. When this

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did not happen, people were forced to shift their thinking to realizing that the physical plane was not yet capable of receiving the supramental force in full.

Against the backdrop of this history of belief, the Auroville Farewell Group has set about dealing with ordinary death. The group has focused largely on crematory practice, the preferred strategy for dealing with the body in India. This is not to say that all Aurovilians so far have been cremated, as some have also been buried at different places in the community. There are pragmatic needs that have to be taken into account. The group has taken great care to select a proper place for the crematorium. The site is an appropriate distance from a neighboring Auroville settlement and sources of groundwater. It also happens to be near a Tamil village. In order to ensure no offence was committed, the village priest was deputed to perform the proper consecrating rites. While currently a low-smoke, cow-dung method (the same as used in the Ashram) is employed to cremate the bodies, the Farewell Group is actively researching cutting edge technology used elsewhere in the world, where electric, very high temperature crematoria are employed in order to cut down on both smoke pollution and tree cutting. In addition, it is compiling data about funerary practices in Benares and Nepal.

Other endeavors engage Aurovilians in conceptualizing cultural institutions appropriate to living in a productive city. Foremost among these is the Center of International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU). This ambitious project
corresponds to the Mother’s indication that Auroville should become a center for international research. In Auroville’s charter, the Mother states, “Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.” This dovetails with many Aurovilians’ current desire for an institution of higher learning. It is important to note that the Mother did not specify precisely what she meant by “research.” In Auroville today the term continues to be used in somewhat abstract ways. I have heard it used in the context of experimenting with new structures of road speed bumps, trying to figure out how to communicate telepathically, or discovering what people living in a particular Auroville settlement think about their living arrangements.

Although CIRHU had been talked about for many years, it received a significant boost when Kireet Joshi, himself an educator, assumed the role of Chairman of the Auroville Foundation. Throughout 1999 and 2000, Joshi and a group of Aurovilians created a basic statement about CIRHU, outlining various educational faculties that would comprise it. The Institute’s mission is ambitious:

To develop an International Research Centre such as CIRHU so that it may become one of the leading world centers for international research into what is probably the most crucial question of our times, whether and how humanity can attain the lofty goal of human unity and real and lasting peace, will take at least ten years and, quite probably, the next 15 years. Further, this Centre had the high ambition of aiming beyond the mere question of humanity’s survival and harmonious development to intensely explore the new field opened by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother who have foreseen a next step of evolution into a New Species as the true destiny of our human race (CIRHU Group 2001: 1).
The faculties include traditional realms of study such as anthropology, religious studies, and economics but under unconventional headings such as “Futuristic Sociology and Futuristic Business Management” and “East, West, and Human Unity.” Groups of people in Auroville currently involved in related activities were encouraged to propose projects and facilities. Perhaps in total some 50 people were involved. After all submitted projects and research proposals were subject to the revision and approval from another group of Aurovilians who had come together to spearhead CIRHU’s development, a proposal was submitted to the Indian government for funding in 2001.

The initial amount requested was a staggering Rs. 129 crore (U.S. $2,866,666) to be spread over a five period. In September 2001 a government committee that visited Auroville whittled it down to Rs. 26 crore (U.S. $577,777). Still later that year the government agreed to consider about Rs. 3 crore (U.S. $66,666) for the project. What has actually arrived so far is another matter. As of September 2004 Rs. 149 lakhs (U.S. $331,333) have arrived. Much of that has gone towards the construction of CIRHU hostel, a luxury guesthouse to accommodate the visiting top experts and scholars that CIRHU believes it will attract. It is hoped that over the next three years the money will continue at a rate of Rs. 98 lakhs ($US 217,777) per year.
Needless to say, as the funds promised dwindled, contention broke out amongst the project holders as to how the actual monies were going to be prioritized. Many people who had worked hard to realize CIRHU grew frustrated and left the team. To date it is unclear to many people exactly how the funds were allotted and to which of the original projects. There is a sense that decisions were made in the hands of a very few people in Auroville, and without the circulation of proper information to people who had worked on their proposals for two years. Nevertheless, the aspiration that Auroville should become an active place of learning and research for residents and international experts is still very much alive at the heart of the collective desire for a city. At the same time, some people feel that current funding conditions require that the community give higher priority to other more pressing needs, such as housing and transportation.

*What is the Master Plan?*

One of the most ambitious endeavors aimed at furthering Auroville’s growth was the creation of the Master Plan. The Plan aimed at laying the groundwork for a more organized approach to Auroville’s urban progress, providing a framework for bringing activities into alignment with both legal mandates and critical thinking about the direction and rate of growth in the greater Auroville and Pondicherry region. Approved by the Ministry for Human Resource
Development in Delhi on April 12, 2001, the plan constituted a significant step
towards concretizing and consolidating Auroville's fragmentary urban
development. The Preamble gives a sense of its ambition:

The Master Plan (Perspective: 2025) provides a policy framework which
will serve as a guide in the preparation of five year Development Plans and
Annual Plans for implementation of the proposals. It is presented in three
parts. Part One describes the exiting scenario and lays down the
imperatives for development. Part Two lays down principles and directions
for long-term growth and gives Development Proposals to make Auroville
the most eco-friendly city. It lays down broad policies in terms of land
utilization, residential densities and qualitative and quantitative aspects of
infrastructure development. Part Three gives the development promotion
regulations and the procedure to be adopted for development (AV
Foundation 2001: 9).

Not surprisingly, as is always the case in any ambitious enterprise, many
Aurovilians were critical of the effort. In particular, differing perspectives about
Mother’s statements rubbed up against one another. Examining the Plan and
reactions to it provides yet another window into the conflictive process of textual
interpretation.

Cities most often tend to be organic enterprises. While there are varying
degrees of planning involved, what actually happens is often more a combination of
implemented development and unchecked growth. Especially in the context of
India, urban planning has had a limited impact. From the outset in Auroville,
however, it was clear that what Mother envisioned was a more orderly trajectory of
progress. As she stated early on, she thought of her city from the perspective of the
detailed plan revealed to her in her visions. To this end she had appointed Roger Anger as chief architect and planner and created the operating unit known as Auroville’s Future to assist. How she might have implemented any plan over time, however, was never known in clear terms. Mother’s physical presence left the scene long before anything resembling urban growth could really begin.

Still the idea of a plan lived on. Its prospect took on more formal dimensions in 1988 when the Indian Parliament passed the Auroville Foundation Act, placing Auroville under the ultimate purview of the Indian government. Included in what was set forth as powers and functions of the Governing Board was the mandate to prepare a master plan for development in consultation with the Residents’ Assembly.

Work on the Master Plan occurred in several phases throughout the 90s and involved the input of many people. But progress was slow. Then, commencing in 1999 a group of Aurovilians already intensely involved in building and planning took up the task in earnest. These people were responding in part to the operations of land speculators who threatened to build a housing colony in the Green Belt surrounding Auroville. The concerned Aurovilians knew that if the city possessed an approved plan Indian government authorities could be called upon to protect land use in the area. In accord with the Governing Board request that experienced town planners be consulted, the team solicited the cooperation of two respected
experts, D.S. Meshram, the Chief Town Planner of the Town and Country Planning Organization in New Delhi, and G. Dattatri, former Chief Town Planner of the Chennai Metropolitan Authority.

From the outset, the need to stress the importance of Auroville as a model for India was emphasized. According to Dattatri in a 2001 interview with *AV Today*, one of the specific purposes of the Plan was “to show the Government of India that Auroville is a very important experiment which will not only benefit Auroville, but also be an example to the rest of the country as in Auroville the city and small village settlements could be developed complimentarily in a move towards integrated, sustainable development” (as quoted in Carel 2001). What was proposed and later accepted by both the Residents Assembly of Auroville and the Indian government was the first phase of a structured plan, known in the field of Indian town planning as the Perspective Plan. The Perspective Plan contains the broad concepts for land use and infrastructure.

In regard to Auroville, the objectives included: 1) establishing zoning for lands falling within 20 square kilometers from the center of Auroville irrespective of land ownership; 2) identifying locations in the Green Belt for agriculture, land regeneration, conservation, and recreation; 3) establishing roads and access ways including areas designated solely for non-polluting traffic; and 4) identifying ways to integrate neighboring villages so as to allow them to benefit from Auroville.
Supporters of the Plan

Many Aurovilians believed that the time had come for taking such an ambitious step towards organizing the community’s growth. There was concern over the fact that few steps had been taken towards even consolidating the land holdings needed to eventually achieve the Auroville imagined by the Mother. Residents were also concerned over the failure to negotiate and cooperate with local village settlements which were swiftly growing and using land in ways that threatened the integrity of Auroville’s Green Belt, a forested zone surrounding the city buffering it against the outside.

As the planning proceeded, a little known fact came to light. Indian law asserts that ultimate planning authority lies with village panchayats (local village, elected governing committees). It was only by sheer luck that the Bumayarpalayam Panchayat, the jurisdiction of which included a large percentage of Auroville’s land, particularly in the Green Belt area, had never sought to exercise its jurisdiction.

There was also a sense that in Auroville proper and in the Green Belt the era of diffuse activity largely focused on reforestation was ending. It was time to move to another phase of endeavor if Auroville was to ever become the kind of city both its residents and the Mother envisioned. When I spoke at length in 2001 with
Rajeshwari, a young woman Aurovilian architect originally from Mumbai (formerly Bombay), who is a primary force behind numerous major projects in the community including the Master Plan, she stated the concern as follows:

It’s a totally different phase since 2000. It’s all going to settle, you know. It was a pioneering age, where people did things in one day. They were just chasing cows the whole day, planting trees. And that phase is over. You can’t keep on doing that. That cannot be the whole Auroville. That phase is done. Some of it may continue to happen but other things are going to open up. We are going to start having collective transport. We are going to have higher density of building. We are going to make space for those 50,000. At least for the next 5,000. And we are going to work not only for our own houses any more. Or think just about our own children, that they go to school, but for the whole education concept of Auroville.

Critics of the Plan

Not surprisingly, not all Aurovilians were so enthusiastic. Although passed almost unanimously in the Residents Assembly, some people expressed disgruntlement over the fact that the Mother’s vision was taking on such seemingly bureaucratic dimensions. I overheard one young man remark that the Plan corresponded to logics of the “old world,” and was, therefore, inappropriate to the new one that Auroville was to become. While most Aurovilians would probably regard such views as extreme and unproductive, it is not uncommon for people to voice the opinion that the means and processes that have been instrumental elsewhere might not be appropriate for the revolutionary purposes that Auroville seeks to accomplish.
The sense that Auroville is a city that should not be like any other city was underscored to me when once at a residents’ meeting someone raised the point that it might not be truly appropriate to call the newly proposed (and since completed) Town Hall building by that name, for the title wrongly implied too much similarity with the “ordinary cities” of the world. For others, skepticism stems from distrust of any kind of planning effort. As one woman commented to me about endeavors in Auroville generally, “How can we possibly set plans from our level of consciousness for something that is being built by higher forces?”

Other people see things more from the perspective that Auroville’s ever evolving spirit defies any schema set for it at a particular moment in time. For example, during the mid-nineties the Auroville Development Group presented a paper defining some of the basic features for the community’s trajectory. As pointed out in AV Today in 1998, one of the noteworthy attributes of the paper was that it defined only what was necessary for Auroville’s present stage. Making reference to Auroville’s evolving spirit, the paper stated, “Nothing can be considered as fixed, final and determined until it has finally been put in matter” (as quoted in AV Today 1998: 111). Given such prevalent attitudes, it is logical that Auroville’s development for most of its history has been piecemeal. The city reflects the aesthetics of a variety of architects without much agreement concerning
a common approach. For some, this is diversity, for other it is an unfortunate happenstance. This Plan's supporters favored a more systematic approach.

Although not always overtly, the Master Plan also faced the opposition of people who disagree with the concept that Auroville should become a city at all, in spite of the Mother's statements. One staunch environmentalist who had been living in the forest that he himself was instrumental in creating remarked to me in 2001, “When it comes to talking about a city, quite frankly I don’t want much to do with it.” While many of Auroville's “green” people have always greeted urban talk with reserve, they are not alone in their sentiments. While it is easy to postulate about the arrival of 50,000 or even 5,000 people and the changes of lifestyle that higher density would bring, when it comes to actual current land use, many Aurovilians are happy to remain as they are.

For the moment it is hard to call Auroville a city. It defies the familiar contrasts that mark a city off from the surrounding countryside. Auroville's dispersed, low-density development, interspersed with forest and fields, and linked by dusty roads lends a certain rural character to the place. However, available resources and conveniences are more characteristic of a small city.

Many people might not want to participate in the kind of changes a city would imply, however. Few people wish to reside in truly communal living arrangements. People prefer building at some distance from the next household.
This is understandable for several reasons. In a tropical climate, doors and windows are always open so distance provides privacy. People also desire access to the outdoors adjacent to their living space.

People living in low-rise apartment style complexes or row houses frequently complain about noisiness and other intrusions on privacy. I have heard amusing stories to this effect, such as a situation in which a friend listed aloud the various strategies she was considering for graciously informing a neighbor that the woman’s enthusiastic vocalizations of sexual pleasure could be heard loud and clear by those living on all sides.

So far, however, such problems are minimal. Auroville’s population totals only some 1,800 people. Although the community has steadily grown (see Table 2), that rate of growth has not propelled Auroville into anything near mid-density mode yet.

The sense that some people, even architects directly involved in city-making projects, might not ever want to see Auroville become a more crowded and more urbanized environment was conveyed to me by Priyamvada, a Tamil woman architect who has been instrumental in the fabrication of several major projects in Auroville, yet was not an active participant of the Master Plan team:

It seems to me a contradiction that the ideal is explicitly about a city, an urban landscape, and people will give lip service to that and spend a lot of energy publicizing that they are working towards that goal, but then at the same time there’s the question, ‘Does the community really want
TABLE 2: AV TOTAL POPULATION BY YEAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>676</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1649</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1772</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that? [...] I know there is the conscious thought in everybody’s mind that they want to create the town, but subconsciously, I think a lot of people are happy with the situation of this low/non-intensified development/ecozone (2001).

At issue once again is the divide between official intentions and the numerous motivations and perspectives that manifest themselves in everyday life. While the idea of manifesting the Mother’s city is a common point of reference around which Aurovilians rally, appearing in all major brochures, mentioned in endless residents’ meetings, and guiding many of their activities, there are a number of differing perspectives on the topic. The city, which is ever so important as a symbol for Aurovilians’ collective identity, is also a staging ground for the contradictory relationship between the community’s philosophical base and its actual conditions.

*The Mother’s Architect*

Disagreement about the Master Plan also stemmed from skepticism about the kind of authority accorded to Roger Anger, the original planner appointed by the Mother. Several people I spoke with, including noted architects in the community, were worried that the Master Plan gave too much weight to Anger’s view of Auroville’s development, which they asserted, was neither desirable nor feasible. This is in spite of the fact that promoters of the Master Plan have clearly stressed that the Plan is a flexible framework, rather than an imposition of rigid
parameters. Debate centers largely around Anger's "Galaxy Plan." While people question details of the plan, at the root is concern about how spiritually-sanctioned authority is invested in some people, in addition to doubt about the relevance of the Mother's spiritual authority in matters of current practicality.

As stated earlier the Mother selected the Galaxy Plan out of the several possible scenarios presented to her. Like its name implies, an aerial view of the plan reveals a spatial pattern of building in which several arms spiral outwards from a central region. The major features of the plan include the division of the city area into four zones (residential, international, industrial, and cultural), a Crown road encircling the center from which a series of other roads radiate outwards, and the so-called "Lines of Force," meaning a succession of high-rise buildings along the radial roads intended as a major area of housing for what the Mother envisioned would one day be a population of 50,000.

All aspects of this arrangement have been criticized over the years. Among the most contentious issues is the idea of distinct zones. These are regarded by some as an anachronistic approach that while prevalent in the 1960s has been uniformly abandoned across the globe in favor of a more integral vision of city life. Critics feel that a more balanced and lively social life is achieved by allowing for a mix of various activities in any sector of town.
Vishwa, an Aurovilian architect who hails from Mumbai and whose current project of restoration and preservation in Pondicherry have brought him recognition from the likes of UNESCO is foremost among the architects who feel strongly that zones are not a productive option. Vishwa has long held views different from Anger’s. In a paper encapsulating Vishwa’s views on Auroville that he wrote and circulated in 1986, he reads the Mother’s intentions differently. The zones of the Galaxy are predicated largely on a small, informal sketch that the Mother had made (see Figure 38) that clearly outlines the division between four spheres. Rather than see the necessity of realizing these spheres spatially, Vishwa argues, “The zones indicated by The Mother could be taken to be more as functional areas of activity,” meaning that they represent four dynamic aspects of city life that should to varying degrees animate the entire fabric of urban space. The plan, however, did not take into account this view.

Another critique of the Master Plan is the whole idea of a total population of 50,000 has come under sharp critique. To begin with, various interpretations have been made of this figure. As stated by members of Auroville’s planning division, AuroFuture, in an August 2003 issue of AV Today, some people over the years have contended that Mother included the roughly 40,000 existing village inhabitants in the local area in her population total (see Chapter 6). Falling back on Anger’s interpretation, however, the team member states, “However, Roger Anger -
Figure 38: The Mother’s sketch of the 4 city zones
Image from the Auroville Master Plan
who has talked so much on Auroville with Mother – is convinced that Mother
didn’t mean that. She meant 50,000 seekers who wish to follow the Charter of
Auroville” (as quoted in Clouston 2003: 5). But some Aurovilians find it absurd
that anyone could conceive of 50,000 people living in an allotted area of 20 sq km,
especially given water resources. Anger’s and other people’s determination to
maintain this figure as a goal is dismissed by some Aurovilians as the product of
something akin to religious dogma, as opposed to the result of a hard, objective
appraisal of environmental and social indicators based upon today’s professional
evaluation techniques.

It seems that so many debates about urban planning in Auroville are caught
up in differing ideas about Anger’s authority. Several of Anger’s staunch
supporters base their allegiance less on the details of his work, than on the belief
that he was somehow destined for his role. The basis for his authority in this regard
is not something that can really be understood in a wholly rational or non-religious
way. For example, at an open, community-wide meeting about Matrimandir on
September 24, 2001, a resident stated in Anger’s support that the Mother had
entrusted certain people with specific duties because they were “receptive to what
Mother wanted” and that it was therefore up to Aurovilians to “trust” this and avoid
“judging with small minds.” Another example of this viewpoint appeared in the
October 13, 2001 AV News in which a statement aimed at clarifying the true history
behind the plans and progress of Matrimandir established that the bond between Anger and the Mother went back to Vedic times (9).

But for those who hold a more rational perspective, it is precisely the details of Roger’s vision that are of concern. Some allege that knowledge advances and that if the Mother were alive today, she would easily perceive the truth of current data. These people say that after all the Mother and Sri Aurobindo constantly revamped their ideas and emphasized that truth evolves. As one resident commented to me, “It is from the ordinary level of consciousness that one gets stuck on ideas, not from the higher.” Implied is that in spite of his role at a particular moment in time, Anger’s authority should not be construed as eternal and beyond critique.

A Dutch Aurovilian, Thomas, once voiced to me an interesting perspective in 2001. He argued that the Mother frequently assigned people duties based upon how she felt that particular circumstances would facilitate their growth rather than because of their importance to a particular task. From this point of view, seeing Anger as “Mother’s Architect” is to indulge in precisely the kind of religiosity that the Mother disavowed. Going along with this is the sense that some people I talked to believed that Anger was not technically competent. Alternatively, other Aurovilians I have spoken with believe that some of those who support Anger do not do so exclusively out of a sense of respect for his leadership, as out of a
recognition that rallying under his banner might be a good basis for securing their own ideas in the process of city making. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the figure of Anger has become a nexus of varied interests in and interpretations of the Mother’s urban dreams.

*Faith in the Master Plan*

Finally, for all the debate, it is not so easy to dismiss the Mother’s approval of the Galaxy plan. From the point of view of many and Anger himself, the plan is truly the best possibility. Criticism of it based upon other factors eclipses from view the fact that the kind of urbanism to be created in Auroville is based on very different criteria than in any other city. In an interview in *AV Today* in December 1989 Anger stated in the plan’s defense:

>This concept contains in its entirety the message of Mother and the dream She had for us. First of all there is the concept of the four zones which springs from a sketch of the Mother, and which no one contests, I believe. Mother gave sufficient explanations concerning the basis of Her concept of spiritual urbanism. Following this we brought Mother a plan...One can try to break away from it, but if one takes into consideration all the elements – the Mother’s messages, the landscape – one always comes back to it. You cannot shake it off. I’d say it is not the image of the Galaxy that imposes itself on Auroville; it is the necessity of the city corresponding to Mother’s guidelines that leads us to the Galaxy. It has a dynamic of its own” (as quoted in *AV Today* 1998: 110).

This sense of the destined nature of the plan, and the singular way in which it alone expresses spatially the true interpretation of the Mother’s urban vision,
makes it almost impossible to approach the subject of its validity without raising heightened emotions. As something the essence of which comes from a place of greater truth and wisdom than this physical plain, any questioning of it can be relegated to the realm of mere “mental” noise. Like many other things in any spiritual practice, and perhaps more so in Auroville than elsewhere, accepting the Galaxy Plan demands faith.

There is a sense of adventure in operating with such faith. Rajeshwari, the young architect actively involved in the Master Plan told me:

The fact that there is a larger dream and I’m doing something in connection with that makes this life livable for me. So for me if the Mother wanted 4 zones and she wanted it to be 2 kilometers, I’m not the kind who will say, “I want it to be 2 and a half kilometers. I know better.” I have no problem trying to solve a town that works within 2 kilometers. No problem. Up to now, I haven’t come across anything that was irrational or sounding impossible. By the way, many things are impossible. That is what the outside world always told us. And that is why we didn’t like that world and we came here. Because we don’t want anyone to tell us this and that are impossible, because we feel that everything is possible (2001).

This bold and idealistic spirit of working towards bringing about the impossible echoes across many aspects of life in Auroville and is a central theme of Auroville’s collective identity. It is not without reason that many people look at their lives in the community as constituting a kind of adventure.

What is contentious is whether idealism need be based upon the literal application of all that Mother might have said. As the architect Priyamvada said with respect to the Mother’s directions:
OK, personally, I think that Mother had a lot to say about many things. But I question how much was coming from her, and how much was answers to people and how much was people questioning her about what she thought about this or that. And for certain things I have a feeling that Mother said, “OK, this is my basic concept.” But if proper information was fed to her then she would analyze it […] She was a spiritual guru. It doesn’t mean that she knew everything and all. Let’s not put her in that box and make her so limited. You know, Mohammed said something about how women should be treated and then it was put inside that little box and that was the end all of how women had to be treated. They didn’t see, or think, or do further about his lifestyle and his other references to whatever, which were in contradication to other statements of his, right? So, if this same procedure that we have seen everywhere in the world with religions, you know, and if we don’t want to face it in this generation then say, “Yeah, OK, there are certain things that Mother said which have a direct relation to our lifestyle and the way we live and what we do and certain things need to be rethought about given what we have on the land today […] Because if it is going to be a thriving city and really people want to live here, I don’t see a problem that things will get reorganized (2001).

The idea that the Mother is to be situated and interpreted within the context of current circumstances would seem to stand at irreconcilable odds with the view that Mother’s words are to be taken as a definitive script for all activities. It is this debate which will not be resolved in the near future that lies at the heart of so many conflicts in Auroville including urban planning.

In the meantime, the Master Plan stands as an important development. The Master Plan has created a higher profile for Auroville internationally. Concurrent with efforts to provide the community with a flexible roadmap for its urban development, residents involved in various aspects of town planning successfully linked Auroville with Asia Urbs, a program sponsored by the European Economic
Community for promoting partnerships between cities in Europe and Asia. As a result, Auroville, partnering with Cologne, Paris, and Venice, hosted an international conference for participating members in 2002, obtained funding for the construction of its Town Hall, receives expert guidance and financial support for elaborating the Master Plan in more detail, and is involved in other networking and information sharing enterprises both locally and internationally. Considering that only a few decades ago Auroville was nothing but acres of barren land, it is extraordinary that the community is now recognized in the world as a city-in-the-making.

**Envisioning the City**

Just as much of the ongoing work in Auroville relates to the gradual building of a full-fledged city, much of the way in which many people view their everyday activities, no matter whether they are working within existing facilities or involved in creating new ones, also is tied to the idea of performing urban space. References to “the city” or comments such as “when the 50,000 come” pop up in daily conversations, as well as in the course of public meetings. Although people have widely differing perspectives on the “Auroville experiment,” as I will discuss below, what is unifying is the need and desire to spend a lot of time talking and thinking about the kind of place that Auroville is.
No one takes the place for granted. The constant conceptualization and representation of the city is a singular feature of daily life in Auroville. This "place talk" assumes many forms, from informal conversation, discussions in the course of residents' meetings, presentations for visitors, to the production of brochures, web site materials, CD Roms, films, etc. It would seem that for many, living in Auroville means not just working towards the community's goals but also actively reflecting upon the kind of life that one leads there.

In this way Auroville is not only a spatial orientation, as delineated by its topographical features, landscape, and architecture, but also a concept. In his analysis of the suburban town of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, John Dorst (1989) asserts that the site is not just the sum of its physical features, but also constitutes a set of perspectives and ways of seeing. Chadds Ford is both a location where people live and the idea of a way of life. The exact same could be said for Auroville – except that what is implicit in Chadds Ford, what is beneath the surface, is explicit and under constant argumentation in Auroville. Moreover, also like Chadds Ford, Auroville denotes different things in different circumstances to different people. It is perhaps ironic that a community that views itself as at odds with the perils of the modern world should so embody the pervasive quality of contemporary urban life of self-reflection and documentation.
It would be impossible in the space allotted here to include and encapsulate the full palette of informal and institutional, hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, reflections about Auroville. I do not claim that what I will consider below is fully comprehensive, but it is representative. Corresponding to its loosely organized and often changing structure, and reflecting the sheer variety of cultural orientations among its residents, representations of the city are numerous and varied. Taken as a whole they resemble a collage-like assemblage of fragments. What I detail below are some of the major themes that emerge amidst the myriad conversations and representations.

*The Official Promise of Utopia*

In considering the different ways that Aurovilians think about their community, it is important to note that the wide range of individual views stand in relation to a strong institutionalized ethos that promotes the promise of Auroville’s vision for the future. There is nothing new afoot here; any ideological movement promotes its version of the truth as special. Thus, it is not surprising that official channels in Auroville invest considerable energy into the creation of representations of the place that reaffirm its utopian dimensions. These representations play a significant role in the actual manifestation of Auroville’s script. It is the belief in the ideal Auroville that motivates people to create the
place. Efforts to visually display the belief, in exhibitions, booklets, CD Roms, etc. are not simply affirmations. They are performative statements that seek to bring about what they represent.

In Auroville's early years, its utopian promise was cast in dramatic, celebratory terms. A good example of the ambitious nature of early plans for "the first planetary city" is a booklet from 1970 that outlines details of the educational facilities that are to promote Auroville as a place of "perpetual evolution" and lifelong education for all its citizens (Equals One). Boldly entitled, "Auroville: The Universe City," the booklet establishes a comprehensive view of education that places strong emphasis on providing every option for the individual to chart her own course of study. In this view, Auroville would provide sophisticated technology and infrastructure, including playgrounds, swimming pools, gardens, planetariums and aquariums, and a series of pavilions for housing museum style exhibitions on every topic under the sun. The whole city would be a hands-on experiment, an elaborate, life-like simulation of its own ideal projections. The booklet includes a simple black and white sketch illustrating the community. This sketch resembles Disney's EPCOT Center in Florida (See Figure 39).

After thirty years, it is unlikely that many Aurovilians would conceptualize of Auroville in the same epic terms as the booklet, without at least acknowledging that the City of the Future is a long-term plan that is going to take a lot of effort and
Figure 39: Vision of Auroville school 1970
Image by Equals One
face many obstacles. The era of the booklet came right out of the grand vision and revolutionary idealism of the 1960s. The Mother was still alive in this world. The ugly struggles with the SAS had not yet occurred. There was everything to hope for, and little experience with which to bring hope into conversation with the concrete reality of the present.

Today it is not astonishing to anyone that the set-up envisioned in the booklet never materialized. Conceptually, it was too ambitious. It was going to demand the cooperation of an awful lot of people with exactly the same vision for its details, something which I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation does not exist. Moreover, for its realization it would require resources of a magnitude that has only ever been available to the likes of commercial enterprises such as Disney.

Yet what keeps Auroville alive and dynamic is the community’s capability to reinterpret its utopian vision in light of immediate circumstances. In this sense, the script for Auroville is like a “classic” play or piece of literature; people can always find new meanings in it and can represent it in ways that resonate with the present. Today Aurovilians have a sharper sense of how challenging it can be to achieve even the smallest plan in the face of the available human, financial and land resources. Consequently, hegemonic discourses about Auroville’s utopian dream have to explicitly acknowledge struggle and challenge to hold any

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legitimacy. Having said this, however, it is still the case that official channels promote a view of Auroville as singular, filled with potential, and harmonious.

The most important example of this is the Visitors’ Center. The Center is not just a place to look at; it constructs and offers a total, embodied experience of the place it represents. Home to an attractive eatery, two boutiques featuring the range of Auroville products, a bookstore, a room with regular show times of videos about Auroville, two small halls which house the *Genius of India* exhibit (see Chapter 6), Matrimandir display, and, finally, and exhibition room that features various museum-style panels and photos about the community’s ideals and progress, the Visitors’ Center is a performative display of the current institutional version of Auroville’s principles and emerging culture. At the same time, the processes behind the scenes of the Center exemplify the ambivalence that surrounds official discourses.

The Center is an attractive, castle-like building, composed of both cloistered corridors and open spaces that combine straight lines with gentle archways and soft, white cement with brick. It is bright, airy, and immaculate in direct contrast with many public spaces in India. Although built in 1988 with outside sources of funding including the U.N., the Visitors’ Center stood neglected from some time, a reflection of the ambivalent attitude of the community towards outsiders.
Although I rarely heard people directly expressing distaste for outsiders – perhaps out of consideration for the fact that I was one myself – my Aurovilian friends often mentioned others that they knew who voiced such opinions. Within the realm of my own experience, I remember a time in 1996 when I wandered around Auroville lost on my bicycle. When a young European woman and her infant child cycled past me I called out – politely from my view – to solicit directions. When the woman continued past without acknowledging me, I assumed that she had not heard me. I followed her on foot for a few meters over to the cycle-park where she dismounted from her vehicle and began to walk towards the settlement called, “Samasti.” I approached and again asked for directions. Obviously displeased by my insistence, she finally turned towards me, shook her head and said simply, “No, no questions. No questions.” The moment seemed ironic to me; with so few markers designating road directions or community names, it is virtually impossible not to get lost. Secondly, from my point of view, visitors contributed much towards Auroville’s financial base. When I mentioned the incident to some of my friends, many were embarrassed, some were bemused, but none were altogether surprised by the woman’s response.

Many Aurovilians regard outsiders as an intrusion into their lives, and an unwelcome distraction from the Yoga and from the hard work of building Auroville. According to an AV Today report on the Visitors Center, it was not until

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sometime in 2000 when the Chairman of Auroville’s Governing Board, Kireet Joshi, stated that Aurovilians should take care to educate visitors that more collective energy was directed at endeavors such as the Center (Alan 2000c).

Under new management since that year, the Center grew into the lively, well-organized facility that it is presently.

Now the center aims to allow visitors to take away a satisfyingly finalized and packaged experience of Auroville. It educates them with an abridged version of the community’s development, easily communicated through photos of finished projects and easily interpreted through a viewer’s preexisting framework of rational progress. It conveys a sense of opulence and style through the beauty of its showcased items, which also serve as an opportunity for visitors to commune with Auroville’s collective spirit through consumption. Lastly, its cleanliness, spacious feel, and refreshments capture Auroville’s desired essence as an oasis from the world. To visit the Center is to visit an idealized city, ruled by order, beauty, and harmony: the kind of place that Auroville aspires to become.

The two boutiques are among the highlights of the Center. Both showrooms feature the impressive range of Auroville’s fine products, whose function, aesthetic, and price are clearly aimed at the taste of foreign and upper class Indian shoppers. Many of the products sold there are sold also in markets overseas. They reflect a distinctly Euro-American sensibility. For example,
garments such as knit tank tops or shirts and dresses that use Indian fabrics in creative ways look much more like something one might buy and wear in New York than in India. Alternatively, leather goods produced by Auroville’s company High Design reflect current international chic. Generally speaking, the quality is very high. All-natural incenses, soaps, and hand-made paper products come elegantly packaged; the wide selection of ceramic goods offers many one-of-a-kind pieces; and hand crafted wooden bowls are of a caliber one would find in the most expensive home accessory shops in big cities. Also featured is a wide-range of postcards, which feature scenes from everyday life in South India. Musical CDs from Auroville artists are also on sale, while books are sold mainly in the adjacent bookstore.

While the handmade beauty of the items seems to embody Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s insistence on physical perfection and order, the emphasis on commodities strikes some visitors I have spoken with as being at odds with their expectations for a spiritually based community. What some people, including Aurovilians, criticize as inflated prices, others maintain are necessary as an important source of income for the community. This raises the question of the economy of the boutique, which as been a source of contention. All of the products sold are made by Aurovilians, and the idea is that the boutique provides a source of income for these local producers. Prices are marked up by 100%. Originally run as
“service unit,” the money made from profits used to go directly to the community’s Central Fund. When the boutique management switched to “commercial unit,” status, this meant that only 33% of the profits went into the Fund, the rest going towards maintaining the boutique and providing income for its employees and management. There are some Aurovilians who feel that this is not the best way to handle boutique money. As of 2004 the matter is under review by Auroville’s Funds and Assets Management Committee.

After shopping one can enjoy a snack, beverage, or meal at the café, which again exemplifies Auroville’s cosmopolitan atmosphere and aim of high quality. The menu offers both typical South Indian items as well as continental fare of a quality that is hard to find in the Pondicherry area. For example, one can enjoy items such as potato-leek soup, ratatouille, pumpkin gratin, roast chicken, and even a very good chocolate mousse. The shaded, outdoor dining area is furnished with tables situated among perfectly manicured palms. A serve-yourself-tap of Auroville’s specially processed, purified water. All in all, it is a highly pleasant respite on a hot day.

While the cosmopolitan air of the boutique, and the pleasurable refreshments of the café make the Visitors’ Center a worthwhile attraction in and of themselves, one of the focal points of the Center is the exhibition about Auroville. The gallery space, which has been used in different ways over the years, now
boasts a series of panels which feature photographs of the community past and present. There is some explanatory text, but the focus is on the pictures. As you walk into the space, the first thing that confronts your eye is the Auroville Charter, presented in English, French, Hindi, and Tamil. From here the panels curve around to an alcove that displays prominently photographs of Mother and Sri Aurobindo along with some text. It is the only mention of the community’s philosophy in the entire exhibit. The mission of Sri Aurobindo is described as facilitating “the creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness.” The Mother’s role is explained as “the task of giving concrete form to Sri Aurobindo’s vision.” Auroville is described as “an attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind.” Following this brief description of Auroville’s essential ideas, comes a series of photographs of Matrimandir featured with the heading, “Auroville Universal Township: A City with a Soul.” There is no further explanation, presumably because upstairs there is an entire room dedicated to Matrimandir.

On the other side of the same alcove a series of panels touts Auroville’s international profile. Featured are photos of the international zone, a collage of portraits of various Aurovilians complete with statistics of all the national origins included among the community’s residents, quotations in support of Auroville from
various important international figures, including the former Director General of UNESCO Federico Mayor, and, finally, information regarding Auroville’s European partners through the AsiaUrbs program. One gets the sense that Auroville prides itself in both the diversity of its people and the fact that it has been identified as an important place by people from outside.

The concentrated, close-up view of Auroville within the very reduced space of the exhibit contrasts with the actual experience of moving through the dispersed community that actually is Auroville. Moving out of the “ideals” area and through the rest of the exhibit, one is confronted with colorful illustrations of various aspects of life in Auroville, beginning with a section on land regeneration. The images of Auroville’s greenery stand in contrast with the black and white images of Auroville’s stark beginnings under the caption “The Early Auroville Landscape.” The feeling conveyed is that nothing short of the environmentally miraculous has taken place here. The next panels show various aspects of village development work. Photos depict the concrete fruits of such labors, including village toilets and the Auroville Health Center, in addition to interactive educational efforts. Given the number of photos and text in this section, it seems that attention has been given to promoting a view that Auroville is not isolated and does not constitute something on the order of an expatriate colony with minimal concern for the world around it. From here other panels of attractive photos convey a sense of the broad range of
activities that take place in the community, including education and services, as well as small-scale production. A final wall gives the viewer a sense of the eclectic and unique architectural aesthetic of the city.

Although the overall institutionalized context of the exhibit makes it an official display, it is important to note that its creators are not endorsed by the community to exclusively manage the presentation of cultural and historical information. No such designated authority exists in Auroville. Like Auroville’s brochures, website, and films, the authors of the exhibit are people who came together to realize something that they and others felt was a necessity and which no one was particularly vying to do.

Additional information for the curious is provided at a display of books and brochures for sale, as well as at the information desk where questions can be answered in several languages. An area of couches around a coffee table offers the very interested more opportunities still for detailed information provided by various publications and back issues of AV Today. The availability of all this information imbues the exhibition hall with an educational feel. The intention is very much for people to come away with some knowledge about Auroville. There is clearly an effort to cater to different kinds of visitors, allowing those with certain levels of interest or literacy to learn through the photographic presentations, while others who are keener to learn specifics can get more detailed information. As such, the
exhibition does not assume that all visitors will be content to restrict themselves to
the superficial overview of the pictures. At issue is the idea that Auroville is not a
simple place, or even one where a person can just appreciate the ideals. It is
complicated and requires information and experience to really understand.
Ironically, the availability of information suggests an easy access into the dynamics
of the community -- which, in fact, is not the way things are. Visiting the exhibit
one would have little idea that many Aurovilians feel ambivalent about visitors.

A friend visiting me in Auroville in 2004 described the exhibit as “very
moving,” since it showed that it was possible to create something out of “absolutely
nothing.” Indeed, from the presentation of the uplifting ideals, to the visual
depictions of people from all over the world engaged in myriad endeavors together,
the image conveyed is one of a flourishing community that is gradually progressing
towards something important, working towards manifesting something that many
people in the world would find noble and courageous. Thus, the ideal image of
Auroville that the exhibit conveys is one based not solely upon a utopian vision, but
a discourse about progress towards a utopian vision.

In restricting the statements about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to the
beginning of the exhibit, emphasizing instead material creations, social
interactions, and labor, Auroville does not come across as a spiritual movement so
much as a total way of life. This way of life is imbued with humanist values. What
is depicted as significant is not that Auroville is the physical manifestation of a
divine dream, but the astonishing result of collective human effort in the face of
tremendous odds.

Interestingly, while the exhibit places an emphasis on work and struggle, it
does not touch upon certain key challenges to the project. By this I mean the
difficulties posed by the presence of so many different points of view. As I stated
in an article I wrote about the exhibit for *AV Today*:

> Given the educational aim, it is not surprising that the panels of the exhibit
remind one of a museum display. The documentary style of the photos, the
straightforward tone of the text, and the addition of statistics about the
community’s size, etc. work together to give the impression of a factual and
irrefutable account of the community. What remains hidden to the eye of
the observer is the possibility that there may be many other points of view
(Pillai 2000a: 4).

While the exhibit designers obviously intend to promote a view of
Auroville’s population as diverse, what does not appear is a sense of the range of
opinion. The Charter stands alone. No statement is made about the processes
through which it comes to be contested, debated, and interpreted. The exhibit does
not point to any unresolved dialogue about the community’s principles and its
actual conditions. In looking at the exhibit one might conclude that all of the
activities illustrated inherently embody something of the spirit of the ideals, as if
translating the Charter into concrete form is a linear process. Debate, contention,
and doubt are not addressed in the exhibit, nor are the community’s structures for organization, governance, or conflict resolution.

The picture one gets from the exhibit is one of harmony and accord. While the exhibit’s depiction of the city’s architecture may show that the community is eclectic and even incongruous, the collage of portraits of its citizens suggests a unity of intention. With respect to history, the exhibition renders legible and seamless what has been in fact a trajectory of conflict. The emphasis is on providing a logical -- if miraculous -- non-disruptive, linear narrative of progress. Auroville’s complexity is rendered as a readily comprehensible, triumphal march from past to present and on into the utopian future.

That the exhibit presents an idealized version of Auroville is not lost on Aurovilians. An *AV Today* article in 2002 cast the dilemma as follows:

While there is an attempt in the photographic exhibition in the information center to give a sense of the texture of life in Auroville, there is an unmistakable tendency – both here and in the introductory videos which are shown upstairs – to favor the photogenic over the ‘actual,’ the finished product over messy process, and harmony over any hint of discord. Natural, perhaps. But it gives a dangerously one-sided view of Auroville, for it suggests, among other things, that Auroville is a product rather than a process. Moreover, by ignoring the process it makes it harder for visitors to understand and therefore enter into what is going on here. There are no gateways, only beautiful products mounted on beautiful pedestals, to be gaped and wondered at (Alan 2002: 3).

Whether the “city with a soul” is to be known for its aspirations or its actualities, its successes or its struggles, or both, is a question that anyone seeking
to represent Auroville to the outside world must deal with. For some it is a question of accurately showing that the community’s human side. For others it is about either inspiring people or constructing a favorable public image that makes outsiders, including important dignitaries and contributors, kindly disposed – definitely an important consideration for the community. In the end, any set of images will present only a partial truth.

Optimists and Skeptics

While institutionalized images of Auroville depict the potential of and progress towards its monumental goals, it goes without saying that amongst Aurovilians there are varying levels of faith in the possibility of actually staging the script set forth by the Mother for the enactment of a new society. Those who maintain that the Mother’s vision is a concrete possibility tend to see its attainment as a question of ardently working towards it. Since the ideals have never before been lived anywhere in the world, Auroville means experimenting with new forms in order to allow the ideals to take shape. This seems to be what many Aurovilians understand as “research.” For example, the title of a black-and-white illustrated booklet about the history of architecture in Auroville exemplifies this belief:

Auroville Architecture: Towards New Forms for a New Consciousness (Prisma 2004). Thus, the society the Mother saw is a possibility if people are willing to
make all aspects of their lives contexts for experimentation. Eventually, after many efforts have been made and human beings have grown and adapted as a result, the experiment will be a success.

One day while having lunch in 2003 I heard a good example of seeing a mundane aspect of life as a powerful ground for experimentation that would eventually lead to the manifestation of the city. At the table where I sat at an Auroville juice bar was an American woman, who had been living in Auroville for many years. When we spoke that day she had recently opted to move into the newly created communal living space known as Creativity. Completed in 2003, Creativity is an apartment style building where residents have separate quarters, but also share communal living spaces and responsibilities for care taking the facility. Seeing the set-up as a group endeavor, the residents were involved in Creativity’s design and keeping tabs on its construction. After moving in, residents met together regularly and engaged in group discussions and activities in the spirit of trying to live together as a collective, as opposed to just sharing the same address. Although more apartment style buildings are being built in Auroville, few settlements actually ask residents to engage in communal activities. When I asked my lunch partner why she had chosen to sign up for Creativity, she replied that she felt that such projects were an important experimental step towards discovering ways to accommodate the kind of population density that 50,000 implied. The
population size that the Mother stated and the Master Plan set forth, a number that the speaker did not question, was going to be a reality when people “learned” to live together in the true spirit of the collective yoga that both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo talked about. The woman added that continuing to live in stand-alone houses could not lead to the fulfillment of essential aspects of the vision for Auroville.

People such as the aforementioned woman see Auroville’s script in an optimistic light. They echo the take that Auroville presents officially to others, a version of the community and its ideals which does not entertain doubt about the feasibility of the enterprise. For these optimists Auroville really is about creating “the ideal place.”

There are others for whom, to return to Thomas More’s play on words, the Auroville ideal is “no place.” In other words, some Aurovilians hold far more ironic opinions regarding official aspirations and interpretations of the Mother’s statements. Although these sentiments are not expressed outright in public forums, they revealed themselves in little ways in daily conversations.

I remember one summer day in 2003 when I ran into an old friend on a road at the outskirts of Auroville. I asked him if he had time for a cup of coffee. He declined my offer, adding with a grin and a roll of his eyes that he had to hurry back up to his residence in “the city,” implying that where he lived hardly deserved
such a name. On another occasion another friend quipped that the community’s name ought to be changed permanently to “Aurosuburbia.” Such viewpoints are grounded in the belief that many of the Mother’s statements are not to be taken literally.

By extension, those who do take her statements at face value are fooling themselves. My friend who rolled his eyes about the use of the word “city” is of the belief, in his words, “This place is never going to be a city.” Others I know concur. Karl told me 2003, “If this place was going to be a city in the way the Mother said it would be, we would have a lot more than 50,000 people living here by now.” Paul, who knows something about the serious scarcity of water resources in the area, said, “The Mother said a lot of things that never happened in that way. There is no way there would ever be enough water around here to support a city.”

These individuals, and others who are like-minded, stand at the opposite end of the spectrum from the architect, Rajeshwari, who I cited earlier as stating that it was specifically in order to realize the impossible that people came to Auroville. Skeptical Aurovilians actually see the impossible as precisely that, impossible. The ideal place described in the script for Auroville is not one that can be attained in this world, or at least not any time soon. Therefore, it is not a question of working towards it, or conducting research to find out how best to materialize it.
This is an interesting point of view, as officially – certainly as according to Auroville’s Entry Group – one comes to Auroville in order to manifest it. When I probed upon this point in 2002 with a Newcomer who voiced skepticism about the attainability of the goals, he shrugged and said, “Just because I don’t think it’s all impossible doesn’t mean that I don’t subscribe to the ideals and think that it’s all something that one SHOULD aspire to.” Thus, people may have many ways of relating to Auroville’s script, even if they think that it cannot be performed in the way that others think that it will be. A person can be a skeptic, and yet still fully participate in the Auroville experiment.

It would be very hard to say how many people stand on what side of the issue of the attainability of Auroville’s goals. During my time in the community I heard any number of people voicing all range of opinions. I never took a survey. To do so might not be looked upon as productive or favorable, since the official sentiment that Aurovilians should be working towards manifesting Auroville is strong. But it probably is safe to say that people who came to Auroville in its early years, at a time when infrastructure was minimal and food was scarce, probably felt more strongly about the attainability of Auroville. Such optimism was necessary to motivate people to come to such a far off place and tolerate its difficult conditions. Today, now that Auroville is a beautiful, comfortable place where one can enjoy a high quality of life, its present state can motivate people to reside there, even if they
are unconvinced about when and how it will become what the Mother said it was
to be.

*A Place Unlike Any Other*

Regardless of whether residents believe in Auroville’s utopian promise or
not, much of the reflection on an individual or public level seems to emphasize that
Auroville is utterly unique. Repeatedly I heard Aurovilians express that there was
no place like Auroville anywhere. With respect to Auroville’s spiritual dimension,
there is little wonder why so many of its residents view it in singular terms. The
Mother herself said it would be, “something that has never been in this present
universe and that will never be again in the same way” (the Mother 1957 as quoted
in *AV Today* 1998 frontispiece). Yet Aurovilians see Auroville as like nowhere
else on earth for a host of worldly reasons as well. A few examples convey the
range of concerns that make Auroville singular to different people.

Some Aurovilians would claim that Auroville is the best place to do
anything. I remember one day at lunch in the communal kitchen at Auroville’s
settlement, Aspiration. The topic came up about a woman’s recent decision to go
home to Europe to give birth to her child. Another young mother at the table piped
up, “But why would anyone do this when here is the best place in the whole
world?” Alternatively, some people think that Auroville is more dynamic than
anywhere else. In 2001 I spoke with a North Indian woman whose work concerns promoting cultural activities in Auroville by both Aurovilian and visiting artists. She proudly described the exhibitions that had taken place in past years, as well as listing off the top of her head the high profile Indian dancers who had performed in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, including modern dancers Astad Deboo and Anita Ratnam, contemporary bharatanatyam choreographer Chandralekha, and Odissi expert Sonal Mansingh. She concluded by emphatically stating that there was "nowhere else in the world" where such a small group of people was producing and consuming so much of such artistic value.

This same wonderment about the singularity of Auroville can be expressed in terms that do not really enter into official discourses about Auroville's singularity. Some people express their views in fantastic terms. Once when I ate in the Solar Kitchen an Aurovilian from Colombia told me that beings from other planets were attentive to the development of Auroville. The reason for this intergalactic interest was Auroville's importance for the evolution of the whole Earth.

Concurrently, there are people who feel Auroville is unique for reasons that outright mock hegemonic interpretations of the ideals. For example, in 2002 Maurice, a Newcomer to Auroville from Belgium, told me when I asked him why he chose to live in Auroville:
Where else in the world could I possibly live like I do, wake up to hear birds singing and the breeze in the trees, bicycle to work, work as little or as much as I like, not have to worry about my meals, cycle from work to yoga class and then come home and sit on my roof and watch the stars? If more people knew about this, we’d be way more than 50,000 in a second!

With this statement the man openly flouted official discourses in asserting that what was appealing about Auroville was not so much its high-minded ideals and spirituality, but how comfortable it was.

Finally, Aurovilians also see the community’s uniqueness in negative terms. In 2002 a North Indian friend, who felt frustrated with proceedings at a residents’ meeting, remarked to me afterwards, “Is there anywhere on earth where you would find such a population density of crazy people except an asylum?”

Clearly, from the vantage point of its residents, Auroville is a special place for all kinds of reasons, many of which have little relation to the community’s ideals. In fact, several reasons seem utterly banal, and thereby perhaps at odds with the Mother’s desire for Auroville to become something unprecedented. Yet no matter what justification a person finds, and whether the reason dovetails with Auroville’s official rhetoric or not, seeing Auroville as unique implies a process of comparison of it with other places. As suggested in a passage from a Summer 1987 issue of the AV International U.K. Newsletter: “Auroville is ‘wholly other’ and yet, because of its uniqueness, to evaluate it in isolation is to falsify its meaning and purpose” (as quoted in Sullivan 1994: 18).
This impulse to see Auroville in relation to other places, whether the place from which one has come, or more generalized notions of “the West” or “India,” stands as an illustration of anthropologist Nadia Lovell’s assertion that people create a sense of belonging to a particular place in part through their view of what is happening in other places in the world (1998). It also raises the point that we experience cities so often in relation to the lived geographical memories we carry around with us of all the other cities we have moved through. As such, Auroville for each Aurovilian is in a sense superimposed upon a layer of mental maps that chart the intimate sensory memories of all the other places she has lived.

I noticed this spatial archive effect at play in my own perception all the time as I looked around and thought, “Oh, but in New York it would be like this…” or as I felt my legs longing for the long walks they are accustomed to and are possible only in a cooler climate and in a place with pedestrian walk ways, such as Manhattan. In others around me, the process of comparison would manifest itself in a whole range of remarks: “This isn’t exactly Paris, you know.” “People in Bombay told me that I would be sacrificing something, but next to that this is a paradise!” “They’re living over there like they are still in Berlin – everything has to be so orderly all the time.”

In voicing comparisons, it was not uncommon for me to hear people express gratitude that they were able to live in Auroville, which they saw as an environment
far superior to that from which they had come. While life in Auroville is seen as
difficult, offering numerous personal as well as physical challenges, there is for
many a sense that it is much more livable than the world that was left behind. The
idea of Auroville as a kind of antidote to the horrors of modernity pervasive
elsewhere in the world is central to how many of its residents think about it.

This way of seeing the community was present from its beginning. For
example, to return to the education booklet *The Universe City*, an introductory
section entitled, "Beyond the Megalopolis" explains the advantages of the kind of
life envisioned for Auroville's 50,000 inhabitants:

Instead of the faceless anonymity, the soullessness of the gross
industrialized city, man of the future will re-member a world where he
knows by sight most of the people he meets [...] The town of the future will
have all the cultural and economic advantages of the city -- its richness and
freedom, its privacy and seclusion, its beautiful buildings, its theatres,
museums, concert halls, etc. -- but in the setting, let us say, of the small
festival or aestival town. It will have all the stimuli, all the flavour of the
metropolis, side by side with the delights of landscaped parks and the quiet
gardens of residential districts [...] There will be no noisy, stinking
automobiles (an aspect of a primitive and ignorant technology), no smoking
chimneys, no polluted water, no slums, no overpopulation. There will be no
juvenile delinquency, no social unrest" (Equals One 1970: no page
number).

Today the same perspective, formulated in reference to current conditions,
is revealed in comments about everything from Auroville's physical environment,
the pace of life, and the quality of human relations. For example a young Tamil
Aurovilian, who hailed from a local village but had spent time visiting the United
States and Europe, commented, “Out there you can’t do anything but work and then you rush home and are tired. In Auroville your life can be for other things, not just your own everyday survival.” A well-educated, middle-aged European friend, who had left a high powered career many years ago to come to Auroville, stated the comparison as follows: “I would have had everything you could ask for there: the best cars, a couple of houses, luxury vacations, and a nice mistress. But then at some point you ask yourself, ‘Is life just for this?’”

This sense that life could only be lived in its most external and superficial modern modes outside Auroville echoed in comments and questions that people from time to time put to me in their curiosity about my own life. For example, at an informal tea-time chat, someone asked me – as happened often enough – why I was not seeking to become an Aurovilian myself. Before I could answer, another Aurovilian piped up, partly to tease me, saying, “Oh she wants to win at the rat race. She’s just here to make her career off of Auroville.” Eager to nip the challenge in the bud, I retorted, “If I had ever wanted to ‘make my career,’ I never would have come to a place like this.” In my response I myself entered into the arena of discourses about Auroville’s elevated status with respect to the rest of the world. At issue was that Auroville was so special, that whether one knew it or not, one was inevitably drawn to it for far more profound reasons than any “career” could presumably entail.
The Green Belt

Figuring high on people's catalogue of the characteristics that separate Auroville from the modern hells of other places is its soothingly green physical setting. The point was hardly lost on G. Dattatri, the urban planning expert from Madras who participated in the creation of the Master Plan, when he observed to me in 2001 that he could not regard Auroville as a model that could be replicated in all aspects elsewhere, since, "Where else in the world can you have a forest around a city?"

The beauty of the natural environment receives the praise of residents and visitors alike. This beauty does not exist solely as a visual artifact to be beheld, but rather is registered as an embodied experience that engages all of the senses. People note that Auroville is not only lush and green, but also significantly cooler than outlying areas, its air fragrant and relatively unpolluted, and its soundscape rich with bird songs as opposed to the harsh blare of loudspeakers and horns that one hears continually in Pondicherry. I was once even surprised to hear a resident claim that the birds sang more sweetly in Auroville than they would anywhere else.

A sense of the place's unique beauty relates directly to a core theme in the community's collective memory, namely the feeling many residents have – whether they have lived in Auroville short or long term – that they are living on, what a
brochure calls, a "land which has returned to life" (Auroville 1995: 9). Many people construe the fact that green could grow in a place so barren as nothing short of a miracle. At the very least, they see Auroville's reforestation as a tribute to human dedication and hard work, as depicted in the pictures at the Visitors' Center.

In this, Auroville shares in its view of nature the pioneering ethos that has characterized the collective imaginings of colonial powers, nation states, and cities throughout modern history. A clear analogy exists here with the kibbutz movement in early Israel. One of the main ideological discourses promoted by the movement was that reclaiming the desert was key to the founding of a new era and a new society (Ben-Rafael 1997). In Auroville, like in the early kibbutzim, transforming the landscape is ultimately about transforming human beings.

Remembering aloud what the place used to be like is a common trope for expressing its present day singularity and noteworthiness. Visiting dignitaries may also activate this trope, as in when the United States Consul from Madras, Bernard Alter, inaugurated the Americas' Pavilion site in Auroville on February 28, 2001. The consul won the affection of the crowd when he reminisced about his first trip

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8W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) asserts that the idea of landscape is an instrument of cultural power, representing an artificial world as if it were "natural" or given. With respect to imperialism, he demonstrates through examples of painting and architecture from Israel and New Zealand how landscape is "central to the national imaginary, a part of daily life that imprints public, collective fantasies on places and scenes" (27-8). Foremost among these fantasies is a sense of expansion of landscape, defined as a progressive development in history, "a projected future of 'development' and 'exploitation.'" (17).
to Auroville in the early seventies, back when Matrimandir was “a big hole in the ground.” People laughed as he grinningly admitted that in seeing the barren landscape for the first time, he wondered just how anything was going to happen.

Yet appreciating the Auroville landscape and cityscape as the fruit of human effort is only part of the picture. While there are several Aurovilians I met who flatly denied seeing the community’s singularity for any otherworldly reasons, many other Aurovilians entertained the belief that Auroville as a place was hardly what met the eye. Its truly singular features lay in the realm of powerful forces.

The Mother’s Force

One can certainly think about Auroville as a site for the visual display of ideological discourses, in this case the complex worldview of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother first as stated directly and then later as interpreted by their followers. Of the relationship between ideology and social space, Boyer notes, “Every discourse sets up a spatial order, a frozen image that captures the manner in which the transitory present is perceived. Momentarily arresting disruptive and energetic forces, representational forms become succinct records of what we consider to be present reality” (1996: 32). To be sure, Aurovilians translate their values and beliefs into architectural and spatial forms as well as into particular uses of space. Yet somewhat at odds with Boyer’s observations of other cities, in Auroville the
resulting "representational forms" do not merely constitute a "frozen image" or "succinct record." In Auroville, the landscape itself is a kind of organism, a presence that exerts a very particular will over the social subjects that it conjures into being.

Amongst the central animating and organizing principles of life in Auroville is that the place itself is alive with a force that ultimately will fashion a city and its inhabitants. Echoing James Fernandez’s idea of the “architectonic” sphere (2003), defined as the mutually constituting relationship between humans and their natural and built environments, an early Aurovilian commented, “It’s not so much that we’re building Auroville, as Auroville is building us” (Wrey as quoted in Sullivan 1994).

Although this attitude is common, it is not one expressed in some presentations the community might make to outsiders. For example, there is nowhere in the Visitors’ Center where Auroville is promoted as a self-building wonder. As I mentioned earlier, the exhibit actually downplays the community’s philosophy.

In contrast, a 2002 film presentation on Auroville, which can be viewed at the Visitor’s Center or purchased on CD Rom, emphasizes the spiritual dimension, as its title reveals, Auroville: A Dream of the Divine. The film emphasizes that Auroville is coming into being of its own accord. It also highlights the divine
inevitability of its destiny. Created by a team of Aurovilians, and produced and distributed by the Auroville Press, *Dream of the Divine* has both English and Tamil versions. Both are shown at the Visitors' Center. The production was made possible by a grant from Stichting De Zaaier, the Netherlands based organization that provides funding for many Auroville projects regularly. The opening footage features scenes of Aurovilians engaged in a wide array of endeavors, from aikido to pottery making to food preparation, while a collage of voices read the text of the Mother's Dream. For example, during scenes showing a dance rehearsal and students in an art class, the voiceover states:

> Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature would be accessible to all; the ability to share in the joy it brings would be limited only by the capacities of each one and not by social and financial position.

From here, the film jumps to the face of an older, Tamil Aurovilian man, to whom an off-camera voice puts the question of whether he believes that the Mother's Dream can be realized in Auroville. Speaking deliberately, the man states, “It was a dream, but a dream of the divine consciousness. So it’s going to be. There is no doubt about it. But we are taking only the first steps now.” This kind of conviction, based upon a faith in the unseen, is an important theme in the Aurovilian public sphere, as evidenced by the variety of ways it comes to be expressed in public meetings. I saw another example of this ethos at a two-day long series of talks in 2001 under the title, “Building the City Seminar.” The talks,
which took place in the SAWCHU building generally used for meetings, were well attended by few hundred Aurovilians. On hand at the opening was Kireet Joshi to provide his remarks about what he thought the Mother envisioned for her city. Several Aurovilians presented their views on the topic, including “research” into original documents about details the Mother’s specifications. The Aurovilian who started off the session observed that the city constituted nothing other than the “tangible material” of something that the Mother had identified on another plane. This city, the convener asserted, would inevitably manifest by virtue of its own strength.

The unseen but powerful entity that moves behind the human scenes in Auroville is sometimes referred to as “Mother’s force.” While not all Aurovilians see their cityscape in these terms, many I interacted with held some form of the belief that the Mother had invested the area with her spiritual dynamism and light. As I argued in Chapter 5, the Mother’s power manifests in innumerable ways, all of which allow her to assume an active role in the enactment of her dream, even if she is not visible to the ordinary eye.

It is not simply that the Mother is the author of Auroville’s script. She is also the director of the performance, guiding and making adjustments to the staging as the plot unfolds. Moreover, as the view of the landscape attests, she is in a sense the theater in which it is all to take place. Pouring her force into the landscape, the
Mother expands her body outwards to encompass the ground on which Auroville is to rise. In the special performance that takes place in this theater, the actors (Aurovilians) do not prepare solely by learning the lines of the script. Their rehearsal process to embody the supramental characters they are to one day become is shaped by their physical contact with the stage. The stage is obviously not a passive substrate on which to work. On the contrary, like the sacred spaces created through ritual, it carries within it a hidden power to transform. Like any theater, the ground of Auroville is a stage imbued with the innate capacity to host another world. And it is in being on stage that the actors learn how to act.

That the environment is empowered with the Mother’s force extends to the Pondicherry region as a whole. As a long-time French Aurovilian described to me:

PIERRE: It’s a funny thing, because I remember when I was about 7 years old, in our countryside in Brittany, we were all sitting around the table for lunch and my mother was reading a letter that she had received from one great aunt of hers and she was a kind of Superiore and sister of Cluny. She said, “Your great aunt is going next to Pondicherry.” And when she said, “Pondicherry” I had an incredible flash. I was a young man of 7, but it was a flash like that. I saw such light, a landscape of light, of white. And I think that Pondicherry, when seen from a distance, is like that (2001).

For this Pierre, and others who may share his perspective if not his immediate revelation, the landscape is the embodiment of cosmological principles that exceed the import of its mere topographical features or even its specific location. The Mother’s force can be felt at a distance. It inhabits Auroville and extends outwards. What Auroville means to many is a space of intimate connection to the
person's own life history. Pondicherry as a place featured in the boy's life long before he actually grew up and migrated there. For this Aurovillian and others, the experience of the Auroville landscape is, like all "geographical experience," composed of the "entire realm of feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in which they apprehend themselves in distinct relationship with their surroundings" (Relph 1989: 20). The land is not merely something to be apprehended visually, but something with which one can have intimate encounters for which physical presence is not a prerequisite. It is a geo-mythical-sacred place that exists independently of its ordinary space.

Therefore for many Aurovilians, living in Auroville means engaging in an ongoing interaction with a living entity whose presence is simultaneously material and spiritual. As described thoroughly by Olsson in her M.A. thesis about Auroville, the Mother's force is seen as having the power to act on individuals and shape the trajectory of their lives without their knowing and sometimes even before they arrive in Auroville (2000: 118). Exercising its transformatory potential, Mother's force is something that can inhabit and animate people's bodies forging an intimate link between the city's residents, its landscape, and its principal founding figure.
Bani, a young, well-educated Indian Aurovilian once told me when I asked her whether she thought that Auroville was especially conducive to spiritual practice:

I believe that Mother not only wanted Auroville to be a special place, a city which is turned towards the God and the Divine, but she also poured her force here. That is the common assumption of any Aurovilian, that Mother was active here. That’s why I believe since this is Mother’s ‘chosen city’ – I believe Christians have their own chosen city – so I believe that in working for Auroville, you are serving the Divine. The interesting thing in my lookout is that when I moved here I hadn’t even formulated anything consciously about doing the Yoga. I just wanted a satisfying job and family and so on. But then it was like almost constantly falling on your face. Events were happening that I couldn’t control. Bad relationships. Went through a lot of self analysis. So, I felt... even now I feel... I was pushed towards growth, towards opening myself more and more towards showing what the finer sides of the nature are. And it was purely the outer circumstances at Auroville. When one makes a commitment to be Aurovilian, and if you are sincere about it, then you get the lessons that you are meant to. The force acts on you (2000)!

This force propels people towards an ever-growing perfection, as indicated in the previous quotation, a process that requires endurance and exacts hard work from the person. Some people believe that there are times when this force may be overwhelming for people who are not ready for it, or who may psychologically fragile. On more than a few occasions I heard people referring to episodes of what medically might be termed “mental illness” in terms of the pressure exerted by the force. But on the contrary, the force is also seen as a protective agent. For example, when I was conveying news of an Aurovilian friend’s serious illness, the
woman with whom I was speaking interrupted me to ponder aloud, “But I thought that people here had the Mother’s protection!”

Belief in the Mother’s force is at the foundation of many residents faith in the promise of Auroville. It is this faith that has empowered many people to endure the difficulties of life in Auroville while maintaining hope that a city on the order of the utopian dream world that the Mother envisioned can indeed manifest. As put forth in an article in *AV Today*, building the city the earth needs “requires not bricks and mortar, master plans and subsidies, but goodwill, honesty, transparency and, above all, a willingness to open ourselves to another reality” (Alan 2003a: 3). The Mother’s ever-present force, in this view, is the conduit towards that other reality, guiding the daily efforts of Aurovilians to construct the town waiting to materialize.

*The City of Disillusion*

Against this backdrop of faith, however, another sentiment pulsates beneath the city’s surface. Although Auroville is a place of hope and idealism, it is also home to the opposing and corrosive sentiments of disappointment and disillusion. It would seem that aspiration and despair might be the Janus-faced guardian of the portal of any utopia, but this perspective is one that I never heard openly acknowledged in any public forum in Auroville. This is not to say that Aurovilians
are not themselves critical of their experiment, but that pessimism and
dejectedness are feelings that must be suppressed in order to maintain the public
face of optimism and faith. But this suppression does not eliminate the negative
feelings and opinions.

Many people over the long haul abandon what at the outset were very high
hopes. As one long-term resident, who wished not to be identified in any way, told
me, “We thought, I thought, it was all happening. Then I just woke up one
morning and realized, ‘Hey, it’s not!’ You don’t know how it just like that hit me.”
Alternatively, a young man, who grew up in Auroville and had returned to the
community after going to high school, college and graduate school elsewhere,
observed:

YOGESH: You have to talk about disillusion in your stuff [dissertation]. I
always wanted to write something about that. There are so many people
who came, these weirdos with their hippy ideas, and then they got totally
disappointed after awhile. Some of them stay, and I wonder how they deal
with it (2001).

Feelings of disillusion are closely linked to the experience of living in
Auroville over time. The question of time is an interesting one, as varying
perspectives have shaped differing projections about the schedule for completing
the city. I have been told that during the early years there was a common
assumption that the city would manifest very quickly; the earth was poised and
ready to begin the new era that the advent of Auroville was to represent. For
example, from a September 25, 1971 journal entry of a Matrimandir worker, it is clear that while actual conditions and progress were already undermining some of the enthusiasm, there was a continued sense that major projects would be completed within a foreseeable future:

After half a year not even one-third of the crater had been completed. Some, many had expected Matrimandir to be ready by August next year, for the day of Sri Aurobindo’s Birth Centenerary. But now one starts thinking in terms of a period of seven years, Mother’s Centenerary. We think She will come herself to inaugurate Matrimandir” (Lohman as quoted in Sullivan 1994: 114).

Today, after many years of conflicts, funding problems, and other unforeseeable delays, there is a much greater sense of the complexity of creating a city like Auroville. People view the present more as a work in progress. Some people see Auroville as a long-term proposition. A noted example in the community is Ulrich Blass, a long-time Dutch Aurovilian known for having made his fortune in computers and software, and known for his history of generous donation to Auroville. In an interview in AV Today about Auroville’s economy, Uli, as he is commonly known, stated in criticism of some current proposals to eliminate the circulation of money in Auroville:

Many people forget that Mother herself was the most flexible of people, who warned very explicitly not to take her words as a dogma. But we do precisely that. The no-money economy, for example, which She herself even declared could take a long, long time to materialize, we try to implement with one jump, instead of developing steadily and slowly, small steps at a time with a long-term perspective (as quoted in Carel 2000: 8).
None of the proposals that Uli criticized have succeeded yet in their ambitious goals. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that official discourses tend towards the rapid view of development. Importantly, the Master Plan envisions that by 2010 the Auroville population will be 15,000. 2025 is the year projected for the targeted 50,000 (2001: 43). This is somewhat astonishing, given that Auroville has grown slowly from its inception (see Table 2). Many people I spoke with felt such figures were wishful thinking. For example, a friend remarked when I asked her about the Master Plan in 2001, “Oh, the Plan is just what people want things to be, not how they are going to happen.” Others are more uncertain, and open minded to any proposition. I heard someone comment in 2002, “We don’t really know when or how it’s all going to happen. It could take a long time, but then again, the world changes so you don’t really know.”

Thus, there are different ideas about whether the Mother’s society can be realized within a foreseeable future, a single lifetime, or many lifetimes. This presents an interesting problem for interacting with Auroville’s script, since it is clear that there is no agreement among the actors as to how long it will take to complete the staging. Is Auroville a relatively short-term performance? Or is it more on the order of a long-term event that will progress through several scenes, which the script only minimally outlines, until it reaches its culmination?
For some Aurovilians there is no sense of urgency. The 2002 video presentation, *A Dream of the Divine*, profiles a middle-aged, North Indian, long-time resident who after affirming the inevitability of the completion of Auroville's mission adds, "How long it takes depends upon us." In this way, optimism is bolstered by a realistic attitude about human abilities. The woman does not question the validity of the ideal. It is not within the realm of possibility, from the point of view of the video, that Auroville is something that cannot be realized. Nor does the video entertain the point of view that it can be realized only over a period of time that exceeds the capacity of any one person to effectively envision or plan for. Whether Auroville is a short-term or long-term performance depends upon the actors, and not the script per se.

For others, however, the fact that the community has not fulfilled their personal aspirations for it within their designated period of time is a source of sorrow, anxiety, anger, and/or bitterness. When I interviewed a long-time, middle-aged Dutch Aurovilian, he summed up the dilemma by identifying what I have observed as one of the essential tensions of philosophical interpretation in Auroville, namely whether or not the community's ideals should change shape over time:

HANS: Being in Auroville is very difficult because you subscribe when you arrive here as a Newcomer or Aurovilian even, you subscribe to the ideas of the Mother of creating a city. Even at the moment you have to sign up for that! And in your mind, in my mind, I changed a lot. When I came ten
years ago, I had a feeling, 'Ah! A lot of good elements [here]. I am very interested if it is working out.' But now it is the year 2000 and I actually don’t think what is going on is working out and I see these ideas [...] No! It’s not fitting anymore. It’s a very sad story. Everything is based on that fixed story and it’s not part of the evolution. That is my opinion. That is blocking for me the whole thing. When you are very sincere -- I believe that most people (I can’t speak for the Tamilians because they have a different background and education and different reasons to come here) they have a lot of reasons to come to Auroville, not specifically Auroville but also as an escape. An escape from the West. Many people had a job, education, they had stress, they had a bad time or a good time. They experienced all the possibilities of the West and then when they are a little older, 35, 40, 45, they notice that life is a little bit more than that. There is more to discover. Not only that, they look for something special. And then maybe the Auroville ideas are fitting [with] their ideas. And here they have a more relaxed life, don’t forget that. So many reasons to come to here. But for many people I feel that somehow it is an escape. They got everything done in the West, they know how it all works. And [they want] to have something new, a way of living with more ideals. Then they come here and see that the ideas of the Mother are not really working out and they get frustrated. I got frustrated and that’s a real problem. The problem is also that Auroville is not developing in a smooth way, because the ideas are not fitting anymore in the evolution of the minds of people living in the year 2000 (2000).

Hans’ response to his growing disappointment had been to remove himself from any public life in Auroville and operate instead on the periphery. He did not move around the community much, and lived and worked at some distance from others. As a man in his mid-fifties with few connections left in his home country of Holland, leaving the place where he had invested most of his personal resources and then returning to dubious economic and personal prospects was hardly a promising option.
To be sure, Auroville is a place where people come and go. At certain periods of its history, namely after the conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society in the 1970s and early 80s, many residents exited, frustrated or exhausted from the air of strife. This is not to say that people leave Auroville only in disappointment. I talked to some people who left for other reasons. For many other people, however, who may also feel they would do better elsewhere or who are dissatisfied generally with life in Auroville, leaving is not an option. For older people who have invested a good part of their lives in the community, or for young people who have grown up in it and may not have the skills or means to go elsewhere, the City of the Dawn can be a place that you get stuck in.

The frustration of having to be in Auroville by default, rather than opting wholeheartedly to be there, was expressed to me by a thirty-something year old man, who grew up in Auroville and felt at odds with what he regarded as conservative, small-town attitudes. He was also skeptical about the attainability of the community’s goals. I quote him at length here, simply because just as the dedication and faith that other Aurovilians voice is inspiring, the perspective of those who do not share that same conviction is also moving:

FRANK: This whole Mother thing. Something goes wrong and people say, “It’s O.K. Mother will take care of it.” A few years ago a guy died of rabies, which is like Stone Age stuff, you know. But the guys were like, “Mother’s grace will solve your problem.” You know, I’ll take Mother’s grace and some medicine. I mean, why fool around? [...] Actually, the thing is that I’ve been through so many things that at this point I’m just
basically living my life and all that...I'm starting to think that a lot of it is just not there. It's just not happening. It was good in the 70s. It sounded great and all that...the hippie movement and all that stuff. Get rid of rules and regulations. Let's live under the sun and all that. But for me it just doesn't work. And for me the proof is that if this place were so great, if what Mother said is so true, then how come thirty years down the line we are still only 1,5000 people? [...] A lot of things that Mother wrote and said, I just think may be a bit wacky.

S.P.: How did this process of doubt begin?

FRANK: I don’t know. Maybe it was just anger or frustration. If she [Mother] was so great and if what she said was so true and all that, why is all this stuff happening? Somehow, it shouldn’t be like this. And frustrating. Growing up I felt I missed out on something [...] I mean, we were a bunch of maybe ten kids maximum my age. I felt kind of like, you know, I wanted to go to school, grow up with a lot of kids. I never had college life, I never had a high school life. It’s education, but there’s also a whole social life also which I missed and I regret. For a long time, I was very bitter about that. I used to keep telling my parents, “You guys really screwed up my life. I didn’t go to school. I’m dumb. I don’t have that social life. And now I cannot go anywhere else (2000).

This sense of being trapped and feeling ill at ease is another thread that runs through the fabric of life in Auroville. While the community and its promise are a haven for some, and even for some an escape, for others Auroville is place from which there can be no escape. It is both a city of dreams and a city of disillusions.

The question naturally arises as to whether the contingent of the disillusioned could alter the course of development in Auroville. In other words, might the sentiments of Hans and Frank, and others like them, stand as a threat to the idealism at the community’s core? Certainly it was disillusion that ultimately has scattered many other social experiments. My sense, and from what I gathered
in the informal conversations I had about this topic with others, is that people who have these feelings represent a marginal percentage of the Auroville population. Most people who live in Auroville seem committed to attempting to live the ideals in some fashion. Also to consider is that even though contradictions and problems abound, it is a very pleasant place in which to live. Unlike the modern hells of many other places on the planet, Auroville is green, relatively peaceful, and full of energy for a wide range of endeavor. People find many reasons to want to live there. Finally, as I have sought to demonstrate, the official discourses about the place continue to effectively project an optimistic outlook, keeping the utopian promise very much alive. At the end of the day, there is the fact that Auroville has survived since 1968 against great odds. While some people may be disillusioned, that Auroville continues to dynamically thrive after so many years is surely a great source of optimism for its residents.

Moving Through the City

As I have depicted in various ways throughout this dissertation, Aurovilians create a sense of place through their activities and material artifacts that produce and represent the space around them, converting what would otherwise be a blank template into a field of meaning, feeling, and symbolism. The actual uses to which spaces are put are an important part of the foundation for the city. By committing
themselves to various purposes within particular locations, people affirm and resist spatial plans and designs, in so doing formulating personal and collective performances of the Auroville philosophy.

Moving through the city becomes a choreography of the community’s spirit, a primary means for putting forth into action varied takes on the Mother’s Dream. In performing in specific spaces, bodies become the surfaces upon which beliefs and concepts about Integral Yoga and the future of Auroville are inscribed. As such, the ways in which the community of Auroville comes to be imagined owes much to what Joseph Roach refers to as “kinesthetic imagination.” This process of drawing upon ideas stored in and transmitted through the body, “is not only an impetus and method for the restoration of behavior but also a means of its imaginative expansion through those extensions of the range of bodily movements and puissances that technological invention and specialized social organization can provide” (1996: 27). The body’s potential for replicating official versions of Auroville’s philosophy, or contesting them, makes it a staging ground for the performance of power. Moreover, as the subject of spatializing techniques in the ongoing development of the city of Auroville, bodies become the means through which a particular social order is engineered as well as defied.9

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9 The relationship between power and space, and how this relationship serves to create and discipline social subjects is discussed extensively by Foucault in his classic essay about the panopticon (1977). My own work borrows from his
An Aurovilian friend, Roderick, once suggested to me that a special kinesthetics animated the Aurovilian public sphere. As we chatted once in his home in 2000, Rod casually asked me, “Shanti, have you ever noticed anything very, very strange in people’s bodies when you pass them on the road in Auroville?” I was uncertain about what he was getting at. Whizzing on a moped or motorcycle past other motorists that you knew or recognized along Auroville’s main roads is part of the daily routine. Sometimes if it was someone you were very friendly with, or had not seen for some time, or had needed to contact anyway about some matter, you both stopped, pulling to the edge to allow others to pass as you chatted. At other times, you would just cock your head to the side in a brief nod and continue about your business. Some people I noticed never nodded or smiled, although they often looked intently. Was Rod referring to these varied codes of etiquette of Auroville’s motorists? Or, as I sensed, was he getting at something out of the ordinary? I pressed him to pinpoint what he meant so that I could answer him correctly, but he did not elaborate. He just said, “Shanti, either you see it or you don’t. You’ll know if you notice it. When you do, let me know.”

perspective, yet at the same time is indebted to de Certeau’s argument that while the microphysics of power is extensive, individuals manage through a range of tactics to resist being reduced to it (1984). In other words, while spatial arrangements are created with an eye to directing interaction and activities in specific ways, people find ways in which to reappropriate these spaces that deflect the intentions of forces of power.
I find that I have yet to discover what it was Rod was referring to that day. When I have mentioned this to other Aurovilians, they have been equally perplexed. Whatever my friend was hinting at would seem to be an idiosyncratic observation. Nevertheless, his point was well taken. In Auroville, or anywhere else, either you see things or you do not. I am writing about some of what I saw. What follows is a series of little vignettes that animate my thinking about Auroville and the myriad ways its residents give it life.

The Solar Kitchen

Because Auroville is so spread out, one does not often have the sense of being in one place with a lot of people. True, there is the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, a huge cavernous proscenium-stage space which hosts regular film showings and occasional live performances of music, dance, or theater sometimes with several hundred people, both Aurovilians and others, in attendance. Then there is the SAWCHU meeting space, where many of the Auroville-wide residents’ meetings take place. SAWCHU has become somewhat of a center of Auroville’s civic culture. Its circular and open-air structure suggest two important themes of life in the community; the circle seems to conjure a sense of unity and inclusiveness, while the fact that the space is not walled in (some people complain about the poor acoustics) conveys the community’s desire to be close to nature.
Meetings generally seem to convene with an initial moment of silence and end in the same way, presumably aimed at creating an atmosphere of peace and solemnity no matter how contentious and chaotic the body of the meeting is. These meetings occur only occasionally and are not always well attended. That is why when I think about performing Auroville’s script in public space, the first thing that comes to my mind is the Solar Kitchen.

The Solar Kitchen, so named for the immense solar disk that provides fuel for much of its cooking, is a cafeteria-style establishment that serves lunch and limited take-away orders in the evening. Although not everyone eats there, it is the foremost gathering spot for the largest number of Aurovilians on a daily basis. While there are other restaurants in Auroville, which many Aurovilians eat in, on a regular lunchtime basis, the Solar Kitchen is a mainstay. The building is designed to seat up to 380 people. As many Aurovilians take their food out, or receive it as it is delivered regularly at certain work sites and all of the schools, the kitchen provides meals for up to 1,000 residents and visitors. Many regulars take out a monthly plan, while others must book their lunches in the morning. The prices are quite nominal, especially for Aurovilians whose food is subsidized here by the Central Fund. In 2004, a lunch cost Rs. 60 ($1.33 U.S.), and the monthly plan for Aurovilians only Rs. 600 ($13.33). The menu reflects the life that it nourishes, a blend of South Indian (sambar, rice, etc.), continental (pasta), and health food (an
emphasis on native, whole grains and fresh, raw salads). Given the size of the community and the demands of the work, it has been so far impossible to find sufficient numbers of Aurovilians to man the operations, so most of the cooking is done by hired village workers, something that some Aurovilians lament.

The eating area has high ceilings and is spacious and airy. After moving through the food line one has the choice of turning to the right or the left. Both sides appear the same, outfitted with large tables and benches and chairs. However, on certain days of the week, an area in the left side is designated for eating in silence. Another section also on the left is furnished with low-standing Japanese style tables. Enclosed behind some pillars, this area provides a bit more privacy than out in the open rooms.

For a time a regular at the Kitchen, I often found myself feeling as though I were standing in the high school cafeteria, pondering where to sit, worried I might sit where I was not welcome, or generally sizing up the different kinds of conversations I would have depending upon my choice of seat. Often I would avoid the tension of the decision by arranging beforehand to meet a friend. The Kitchen was definitely the right time to catch up with people, whether socially or using the lunch to conduct work. Many people and groups sat at the same exact tables week after week. Not surprisingly, young people sat with one another. Even more noticeable was the fact that Tamilians tended to congregate at the same tables.
Aurovilians I knew would occasionally comment about the “black-white” separation. To be sure, language played a significant role in these social dynamics. In the relaxed atmosphere of lunch-break time, it seemed natural that people might feel most comfortable relating to others speaking their native language. Yet the groupings also seemed to suggest something about people’s social circles and the kinds of interactions they had throughout the day. Often when I casually inquired I found that the names of many of the Tamilians present were not even known to the other Aurovilians around. Moreover, often they were not even sure as to whether certain individuals were Aurovilians or guest workers.

Eating in the Kitchen, besides the obvious sociality, seems largely a matter of convenience for people rather than culinary preference. While some people seemed perfectly satisfied with the choice available, others complained it was tiresome but better than cooking for oneself. Eating at the Solar Kitchen could have other meanings for some people, however.

One friend of mine, Sukanya, who had grown up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, told me that she regarded enduring the monotony of eating daily in the Kitchen as part of her yoga. She likened it to a time when she had eaten all three meals a day exclusively in the Ashram Dining Hall which offers a far more limited range of dishes. At that time she had decided to commit herself to the Mother’s statements that what was provided in the Dining Hall was exactly all
that was ever really needed to keep healthy and strong. Seeing eating in the Solar Kitchen as part of a discipline of “eating to live and not living to eat,” Sukanya saw going there every day as a spiritual practice in alignment with the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo about the importance of caring for and spiritualizing the body. Thus, nutrition became an opportunity for performing the Integral Yoga philosophy, an act in which the body becomes the instrument for transcribing ideals into the flesh. As such, the Solar Kitchen was not merely a venue for facilitating essential metabolic processes, but more importantly, a stage for enacting cosmological principles.

Eating as a method for enacting one’s principles took on a totally different meaning for Krishna, another person I observed. This middle-aged Tamil man was a long-time resident of Auroville held in high esteem by many Aurovilians. He ate with all kinds of different people and I found myself often at his table. I noticed after a few occasions that all he took from the line was plain rice and curd (yogurt). Thinking he was perhaps not well or on some restricted diet, I asked him why he stuck to the same menu day after day. He replied, “I want others to see that this *sambar* (a typical South Indian gravy) and all that they give is not good food. It is not possible for anyone who knows *sambar* to eat it. Mother did not say that food in Auroville should be without taste!” For this man eating constituted a political statement, a micro-level act of resistance and protest against the order of things. He
was enacting something on the order of what Michel De Certeau has configured as
an everyday means to make political statements within the confines hegemonic

Firstly, aware that culture is political, Krishna interpreted the Solar
Kitchen recipes not as a harmonious and tasty blending of “East” and “West,” but
rather as a sub-standard Euro-American interpretation of South Indian food. At the
same time, his lunch choice was intended as a comment upon what he regarded as
literally a tasteless interpretation of the Mother. In the context of detailing her idea
for pavilions of the world’s national cultures in the International Zone, the Mother
indicated that the cuisines of each place should be served. But, as Krishna wryly
demonstrated, she did not specify that the food should be unattractive. Of course,
food, like philosophy, is subject to infinite interpretations and as in so many other
aspects of life, the Mother did not take it upon herself to dictate recipes or arbitrate
the proclivities of the tongue.

To conclude, the Solar Kitchen, while for some viewed as a mere pit stop
for filling the stomach, is for others a ground charged with personal and social
significance. Through the daily ritual of eating, people animate the Solar Kitchen’s
spacious halls with multiple meanings. Where you sit and what you consume are
not neutral acts, but often symbolic means for communicating one’s politics or for
invoking abstract forces.
Collective, Public, and Private Spaces and Property

The Mother made it clear in several statements that there should be no private property in Auroville. For example, the first line of the Auroville Charter states, “Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole.” Thus, all land holdings and infrastructure should belong to the collective. In theory this holds true in Auroville. All land is held in the community’s name, and buildings and businesses are developed with the understanding that the investment and profits, if any, will remain in Auroville. I did hear of instances, however, in which houses were sold as if they were privately owned, the idea being that if a person was leaving Auroville or moving elsewhere within the community and did not have sufficient funds, they could recuperate the money they had invested.

Money transactions aside, the way in which occupants use spaces is a whole other matter. People sometimes exercise prerogatives as if they were owners. The observation is hardly lost on Aurovilians. I often heard people complain that the trend had become too “individualistic.” This view often followed from a perception that in the early days people had fewer possessions and freely shared the little resources they had with others. Due to the community’s size, the tasks to be accomplished, and the more idealistic atmosphere, there was a greater
sense of togetherness, what I once heard referred to in a residents’ meeting as “collective fire.”

In very general terms the individualistic trend manifests in the overwhelming preference for single-standing houses and the highly independent lifestyle of most residents. Although Aurovilians live in settlements referred to as “communities,” the general consensus was that there were few communal interactions, processes, or sentiments in most of these locations. Two notable exceptions are the small communities of Adventure and Verite, and more recently Creativity, where group decision-making and emotional bonding are emphasized in many organized, mandatory activities. The other location commonly referred to as being more of a “community” is Aspiration, which is actually Auroville’s first settlement.

People who live there, however, often have a different view, feeling that the only collective activity is the organized, communal kitchen where most residents take turns cooking. As one young Indian woman once remarked to me, “I don’t think that Mother meant for us all to do the collective yoga just by eating together.” To what extent the kitchen even was a collective space was also questioned. One long-term Aspiration resident complained to me often that a few other residents regularly took ingredients from the kitchen back to their own homes for their own private cooking.
More amusingly, I was once told by a close friend living in Aspiration about an incident in which a young man who was living for a brief while in the community went through the serving line and took nothing until he reached the fruit salad. He then promptly proceeded to empty much of what was intended for some thirty people onto his own plate. The incident might have gone without comment had not one particularly outspoken resident intervened, accusing the fruit glutton of taking more than his share. In his own defense, the young man argued that he was unable to eat any of the other items. When the critic continued, the man returned some fruit to the serving dish. This tussle is a mini-example of a tension that echoes across many aspects of life, namely between individual needs and desires, on the one hand, and common interests on the other.

Naturally part of the problem evolves from differing definitions of common interests and the proper corresponding uses for “collective” spaces. For a time during 2002 I house sat, along with an Aurovilian friend, the apartment of another Aurovilian who had gone to Europe for an extended period but wanted to be able to return to her residence when necessary. Although each apartment was purchased with the private funds of each resident, the builders of the entire building, who also resided in it, maintained some rights over the use of each unit. This included authorization for any additions or repairs, as well as a say in who could live there.
The unit that my friend and I occupied was at the front of the building and overlooked a garden patio surrounded by a four-foot wall. When we arrived at the unit, the garden was green and lush. For reasons of privacy for herself and her two teenage daughters, the owner had planted bushes and trees along the perimeter on the inside of the wall. For reasons I was never able to fully ascertain, the builders stipulated that these plants were too tall and needed to be cut back so that they did not exceed the height of the wall. My friend informed the builders that he would need to contact the unit’s owner to gain her consent before anything could be touched. One day, before any definitive answer had come from the owner by email, we arrived back at the apartment to find that all of the plants had been cut back in the least elegant possible way. Their branches gone, several of the trees appeared like leafless trunks that had been hacked across the top, rather than properly pruned. Seeing this outrageous butchery made my friend and I feel both sad and violated. From the point of view of those responsible, however, it was a question of their view of the proper care and use of the building as a whole. This took precedence over individual considerations. The building belonged to Auroville as a whole, and they believed that they represented the collective interest. Hence, there was no “private” space to encroach upon. Ironically in my view, I later read on a website that Disney’s community of Celebration also observes strict
rules about the height of plants in individual homes. Thus, landscaping would seem to be an important component of social engineering generally.

I observed yet another example of tensions over competing definitions of "private" and "public" or "collective" space when visiting one of the library facilities. When I arrived one morning to look through some volumes of the Agenda, I noticed that a young Indian couple, whom I assumed were guests, had come before me and were having a look around. Not paying much heed, I sat down to peruse the material I had been looking for. Some minutes later I looked up hearing a discussion going on between the couple and the Aurovilian woman running the library. The Aurovilian was politely asking the couple to leave. Obviously perplexed and somewhat annoyed, the young woman of the pair asked why it was necessary for them to go when the posted hours indicated that facility was open at that time. The Aurovilian woman began to explain that she was very "sensitive" and that for her it was not possible to be around certain kinds of "vibrations." Even more puzzled, the young couple left rather than press the matter further. I kept my nose buried in my book, hoping that my own vibes would not lead to my being denied access to the collection. Later, when I mentioned this incident to a friend of mine, she made the observation that people often treated spaces as if they belonged to them alone. In this case, it was the librarian’s
perceived need to protect her own well being that prompted her to patrol the public facility in the manner that she did.

The fact that the people who were asked to leave were guests to the community stood out in my mind as an example of the distinction between “collective” and “public” space. The library was collective but not public. The librarian in charge of the facility could make whatever decision she felt she needed to make. Auroville as a whole attempts to maintain some spaces for the exclusive use of its official residents. In this sense, some collective areas are “privatized.” In addition to the library, SAWCHU provides the setting for meetings to be attended by Aurovilians only. The Matrimandir is reserved most hours of the day exclusively for Aurovilians. This patrolling of space is regarded by some Aurovilians as a necessary response to the growing onslaught of casual visitors. They also worry about rowdy intruders at events like open parties or simply people who cruise around Auroville’s roads on weekends.

But for other Aurovilians there is concern that such privatizing strategies and behaviors are antithetical to what is needed to develop a city, which after all by its nature is an open destination. Moreover, the Mother herself described Auroville as early as 1965 in comparison with the Ashram, as “the contact with the outside world” (AV Press n.d.: 19). But today, as one young architect put it, “Auroville has become a gated community.” The sense of a loss of free access is felt by
Aurovilians themselves. In an interview with long-time resident Krishna in 2001 he lamented to me that whereas before it was possible to move around freely, “Now you do not feel welcome anywhere. Everywhere you go there is a security guard at the gate asking who you are.”

The growing concern over security is not unwarranted. Burglaries have always been a possibility, facilitated by the relative distance between houses and the remote locations of many of them. More recently, violent incidents propelled by gang activity in local villages have become a far more dangerous threat. Nevertheless, avoiding the creation of an exclusive “club” and promoting the development of a safe and welcoming city are challenges that apparently will continue to shape Auroville’s urban development.

Illicit Uses

Mother intended for Auroville to be a place where people could experience life free of convention and “petty moralities.” This was not, however, intended to create a free-for-all kind of atmosphere in which people could live like “cats and dogs.” In 1970, when she issued a statement about what was necessary “to be a true Aurovilian,” she mentioned, “One lives in Auroville in order to be free from moral and social conventions; but this freedom must not be a slavery to the ego, to its desires and ambitions” (as quoted in Auroville n.d.). Perhaps to this end the
Mother did indicate some general guidelines for behavior, even as she was reluctant to create an atmosphere in which individuals, each with her own proclivities and needs, would have to conform to homogenizing dictates. Among these rules was no consumption of drugs or alcohol inside Auroville. For this reason, alcoholic beverages are not sold in any Auroville store or restaurant.

This does not mean, however, that Aurovilians do not drink, nor do they necessarily feel that they should not do so. Despite the fact that there are certainly cases of drug or alcohol addiction, many people feel entitled to occasional, moderate consumption in social settings. After all, a cold beer is highly inviting on a hot day. And while drinking is not something that is talked about freely in public settings, it is not a secret either. Nevertheless, accommodating these desires means expanding the geography of Auroville, at some level incorporating into daily life spaces that are actually outside the city's borders. While these spaces are regularly frequented, becoming inseparably linked to the rhythm of life inside Auroville, they do not appear on any official map.

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10 In a passage from the Agenda from April 6, 1968, Mother spoke of her reluctance to have to create general guidelines about drug and alcohol, when for some people their consumption was not a problem and did not infringe upon either their development or the freedom of others. The conversation occurs in the context of reflecting how for many aspects of life things should be an individual choice. Given that many humans lack the proper discrimination and appraisal of their own weaknesses and the needs of others, rules become necessary (AV Press n.d.: 80-2).

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One such place is the “Snake Pit.” The Pit refers to an open-air bar on the main road into Pondicherry just a stone’s throw from the main entrance to Auroville. The Snake Pit’s official name is “Palm Beach,” locally known simply as “Palms.” Although Palms also provides rooms for travelers who are passing through the region, its most steady clientele consists of Aurovilians, some of whom have been drinking there regularly for years. I discovered Palms one night in 2001 when an Aurovilian pal asked if I wanted to come along and meet up with some of his friends. Eager for a night out, I accepted the invite. We entered the bar and headed right to a table at the back, which was already filled with a group of middle aged Aurovilian men and women eating and drinking. “Welcome to the Snake Pit,” one said to me warmly. I sat down and for the next several hours joined in the good-natured banter. People were considerably amused when I admitted that I was conducting research. A North Indian gentleman known for his serious fondness for drink and a card-carrying member of the core group who visited Palms several days a week piped up, “So you are doing research? That explains it, then. Not many guests find their way down to the Snake Pit.” Someone else quipped that that was because the place was not supramental enough to have its own rightful entry in the Auroville Directory. Somewhere around midnight the owner indicated he wanted to close for the night. The cheery crowd was in the mood to continue the festivities and so ordered a couple of rounds of “parcel beer.” Minutes later the waiter
returned with several beers carefully wrapped individually in unassuming brown paper. Dividing them amongst us, we headed off on our motorbikes to the home of one member of the party. Curious, I asked my friend whether this kind of thing happened often and whether we could get in trouble. He was truly amused at my sheepishness and responded, "Did you think that Aurovilians are saints or something?"

Whether something as innocent as a couple of rounds of beer could be consumed openly is another question, however. South India does not have a culture of social drinking except at the most elite levels of society. Drinking alcohol is associated with alcoholism and drunkenness in the minds of most people. It is only natural that from the point of view of the community as a whole such things could not be publicly acknowledged because much is at stake in maintaining a certain public image, particularly in the eyes of the Indian government. Although Auroville was never at all intended to be an ashram or any kind of an austere environment, its spiritual values are among its most salient features from the point of view of visiting dignitaries. Drinking, even of the most moderate, social kind, would not sit well with conservative Hindus, who are often already quick to fall back upon stereotypes of foreigners as being immoral. The consumption of drugs would be considered far worse, as they are illegal in India. This does not mean that
they are not also consumed, of course, although this is also never spoken about in public forums.

Amongst Aurovilians themselves even, there are many who would regard all such behaviors as antithetical to the spirit of the Integral Yoga. In the very least, they are certainly a direct contradiction of the Mother’s directions for comportment in Auroville. Thus, the Snake Pit can only remain a widely known, underground location.

As Aurovilians expand their sense of belonging to spaces that lie outside official boundaries, they also expand the significance of spaces within Auroville through illicit uses. Using public spaces for purposes that run counter to hegemonic ways of conceptualizing the significance of Auroville as a place as a whole occupies a primary strategy for resisting official versions of Integral Yoga and the Auroville Charter. Given the open nature of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, some might argue that nothing lies outside the realm of life and spiritual practice, which are ultimately one and the same. In practice, however, practicality and a need to implement policies that maintain the overall integrity of the community’s official goals conjoin to designate particular behaviors as appropriate in certain settings and others as off-limits.

A particularly amusing anecdote is worthy of mention here. On one of my “pre-field” visits to Auroville in the late 90s I stayed some weeks at Center
Guesthouse, the oldest guesthouse and one of the most beautiful and accommodating. Several Aurovilians ate lunch at the guesthouse and I often joined them at their table. In this way I met a long-time Italian resident whose pleasing penchant for good humor and jokes drew me into lively conversation on a few occasions. Happy to continue the friendly dialogue at another venue, I did not think twice about accepting the invitation for a dinner at his home along with others. A doubt visited my mind only briefly when I mentioned to the guesthouse manager that I would not be eating there that evening. When she learned I would be dining with Gentleman X, she immediately exclaimed, “Uh oh!” The evening arrived and I showed up at the appointed time only to find that the two other guests, also young women, were leaving shortly thereafter. Still unsuspecting, I enjoyed the dinner and the company up until somewhere around ten o’clock, at which time I indicated that I needed to go. Informing me that it was not safe to travel on my moped alone back to the guesthouse at that hour, my host indicated that he would ride along with me on his own vehicle. We arrived at the guesthouse and I parked my vehicle and turned to say goodnight. Then, I caught a familiar but at the moment unexpected gleam in my hosts’ eye. He had dismounted from his bike and taking my hand asked me if I would come with him to Matrimandir Gardens. “The moon is very beautiful and we can be together there.” I declined the offer and walked away.
It seemed highly amusing to me that the Gardens, the site of Auroville’s all-important “soul,” Matrimandir, and, like the structure, the source for endless debate over various ideas about the Mother’s intentions, could become the site for an evening’s tryst. The Gardens are not even open at that late hour. And they certainly would not be considered in the minds of most Aurovilians as an appropriate place for a rendezvous at any time of day or night. People enter the Gardens primarily en route to meditating in the Matrimandir Chamber, or alternatively, underneath the gigantic banyan tree that stands nearby. Silence is required in the whole area. As such one feels very much that one is treading on important, sacred ground. Clearly Gentleman X was aware of all this, but it did not stand in way of his reconfiguration of the purpose of that place. For him the ground was charged with possibilities of a different sort. In sharp contrast to the official and public declarations about the transformational capacities of this part of Auroville, and its unique place in allowing the whole of the community to manifest, this Aurovilian was determined to reinvent the Gardens into his own private playground. Who knows how many he had managed to lure to the Gardens’ quiet and fragrant paths for a moonlit “walk”? What is certain is that his actions exemplify the multiple unofficial meanings Aurovilians ascribe to even the most sacred of locales.
Conclusion

While being an Aurovilian means different things to different people, for a majority of residents it implies participating in the building of the Mother's ideal city, understood as not only bricks and mortar, but, more importantly, as a new way of life. To create this city out of nothing in a barren land is an ambitious task. It is a goal that involves Aurovilians in a range of activities that contribute to the development of not only infrastructure, but also the cultural institutions and industry associated with urban living.

Like all aspects of life in Auroville, inspiration for these efforts comes from transcriptions of the Mother's instructions and musings, which function as a script for the enactment of a perfect, urban society. People are also motivated by the aspiration that Auroville become a model of ecological and social sustainability. Building such a city is an experimental and conflictive process for a host of reasons, particularly because of disagreements over how to interpret the Mother's intentions as recorded in her words, as well as what authority to ascribe to Roger Anger, her designated architect.

While any spatial organization is shaped by the struggle amongst productive forces (Foucault 1978, 1986; Soja 1989), in Auroville the city is more than meets the eye. Seen as a repository of the Mother's force, it is a living entity waiting to assume physical form. It is a world waiting to be built in spite of those who are
actively seeking to construct it. The Mother is much more than the mere author of this grand environmental performance. She is also the director and the very theater in which the urban scenes are to unfold. It is for this reason that the very ground on which Auroville is built is charged with the power to bring forth the kinds of citizens who will inhabit it. In a very real sense, it is the stage itself that is producing the conditions necessary for their gradual perfection of the actors who will enact the Mother’s script under her invisible direction. Space and human life mutually constitute one another. To be an Aurovilian, in this view, is to live in intimate connection with a landscape impregnated with this force. It is a connection so compelling that it supersedes direct geographical experience, even as it commits people to feeling that they belong to a particular place.

Auroville’s singularity, however, produces a range of sentiments. For some the promise of the city inspires great faith. It also offers a refuge from the horrors of the contemporary world. But it can be a trap for those who are disappointed or who feel that they have nowhere else to go. While official representations emphasize Auroville’s spiritual foundation, or alternatively, its physical progress and cosmopolitan air, in truth the city-in-the-making is a ground for a multiplicity of perspectives and interactions, each with a unique relation to what are generally recognized as Auroville’s goals. This includes ways of being that expand or resist common assumptions about what it means to be an Aurovilian.
All of this is to say that there is no one city. Even as Aurovilians collectively refer to a particular place – one unlike any other – they simultaneously deconstruct any monolithic conception of locality. Auroville is home to innumerable experiences that coalesce and diverge at different points.
CHAPTER 8
BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The annual bonfire that marks the birthday of Auroville on February 28 is the occasion on which the most Aurovilians come together (see Figure 40). The event takes place in the amphitheater adjacent to Matrimandir at dawn. Over a thousand people, scattered throughout the seating area, gather around a large bonfire. It is an impressive sight; the brilliant orange of the flames stand at first in stark contrast with the dark sky, illuminating an elaborate design of flowers that surround the huge logs. Sparks shoot upwards and seem to mingle with the dawn, whose rosy fingers appear on the horizon and gradually encompass everything. Candles, placed throughout the seating area, flicker and dance with the cool morning breeze. The silence is punctuated only by the gradual crescendo of birdsong and the occasion laugh or cry of a child.

It might seem strange to the reader that it is only at the end of this narrative that I should mention one of the most significant ritual events in Auroville. From my viewpoint, however, it makes complete sense. This moment, which seems to stand so much apart from everything else, can only be understood in relation to the aspirations, struggles, and contradictions that characterize everyday life. As argued by Paul Connerton in his discussion of ritual, "Although demarcated in time and
Figure 40: Bonfire at the amphitheater at dawn
Photo by John Mandeen, Visitors Centre Postcards series
space, rites are also as it were porous. They are held to be meaningful because rites have significance with respect to further non-ritual action, the whole life of a community” (1989: 45). In bringing citizens together in silence at the center of the “city with a soul,” the bonfire departs from the disparate strands and conflictive processes of everyday life, even as it is intimately connected to them. As an event that Aurovilians return to again and again, it seems a fitting way to come full circle in my own reflection.

In a community based upon a philosophy in which almost no practices are prescribed, the bonfire is a significant ritual event, which resonates on multiple levels. On one level it commemorates the very beginning of Auroville, which was inaugurated by a grand ceremony on that same day in February in 1968. As I have demonstrated in many ways throughout this dissertation, many Aurovilians see Auroville a place of overwhelming significance. It is not surprising that the event of 1968 is remembered today in epic terms. As the opening statement of an issue of AV Today dedicated to showcasing the memories of various people who participated in the inauguration describes it, “Over 5,000 people attended. Many of them were aware, even at the time, that this was an event of major importance not only for India but also for the world” (Alan 2003c: 1).

Today’s ceremony mirrors that eventful day. In 1968 there was no amphitheater yet. But the ceramic urn, which today stands at the center of the
amphitheater was there. The inauguration began at 10:30 in the morning, after
busloads of people had traveled what was then the open and desolate terrain from
Pondy to the site. A gong sounded, followed by a few bars of a recording of the
Mother playing the organ. Then came the Mother’s own voice. She did not attend
the event in person, but relayed her message live from her room in the Ashram via
radio. In a voice quivering and hollow with age, and yet irrefutably resolute, the
Mother began, “Salut d’Auroville a tous les homes de bonne volonté. Sont convies
a Auroville tous ceux qui ont soif de progres et aspirant a une vie plus haute et plus
vraie” (Greetings from Auroville to all men of goodwill. Are invited to Auroville
all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life). After a
couple more bars of music, she read out in French the Auroville Charter. It was the
first time that she read aloud to all Aurovilians and Auroville’s supporters the text
that would become one of the primary components of the script for realizing her
dream. After this opening, the Charter was read by others present at the scene in a
total of 16 languages. Two young delegates, a man and a woman, from each of the
states of India, and from 124 countries (63 persons were assigned by embassies,
and the rest were students from the Ashram school) approached in succession the
urn. Walking slowly and purposefully up the spiral ramp, carrying a placard
designating their origin, they proceeded to deposit into the urn a small bowl of
earth from their respective state or country. It seems to have been a magical
moment for many participants. As the Indian woman who carried the earth and placard representing China recollected in a letter she wrote to the Mother after the event, “As I walked into the arena with China’s flag in my hands an electric shock seems to have passed through my being emptying it of all thoughts and feelings and ‘touching the moment with eternity.’ Nearly everyone present must have felt something for there was a trance-like quality in their gait when they entered the arena” (Arora 2003: 6).

The bonfires, which have taken place next to the urn since that time, commemorating both the day of Auroville’s birth as well as Sri Aurobindo’s birthday on August 15, conjure up the ethereal intensity of that moment in 1968. Like the commemorative ceremonies described by Connerton (1989), they are a forceful, collective mnemonic device. Today no one walks the ramp of the urn, but one must purposefully and in complete silence walk the dirt path that leads from the parking lot, past a gigantic banyan tree, and through the Matrimandir Gardens towards the amphitheater. The crew of Matrimandir hired “guards” are on hand to ensure that the silence is maintained and that the movement proceeds as choreographed. Staging a unity of intention clearly precludes spontaneity. Moreover, ensuring the ritual’s sanctity means making sure that behavior conforms to meaningful, routine patterns that can be repeated through time.
After taking a seat, one looks towards the urn as it stands illumined by the flames. It is as if the very spirit of Auroville – conceived as the spirit of all humanity and represented by the commingling earth – is rekindled. This belief in Auroville as utterly unique, and yet symbolic of the aspiration of all humankind, is given form at that moment through the contours of the urn, which stands pregnant with hope.

Yet it is not only with history and an originating aspiration that Aurovilians reconnect. Most significantly, the bonfire vaults participants into intense proximity with what many of them see as they centrifugal force of their community, the Mother. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the Mother is the director of her ongoing monumental performance of an ideal society. Although not present in physical form, she manifests across the landscape of Auroville and through the powerful substrate of particular objects. As argued convincingly by Olssen in her thesis about Auroville, “It is this force that is celebrated on Auroville’s birthday” (2000: 165). Without the force there would be no Auroville. And it is because of the force that Auroville continues to grow and develop, celebrating its birthday each and every year. A long-time Tamil Aurovilian explained it to me this way:

Shekar: The Mother is always here. She is always with us. But we are all human beings. We are not living in that reality of her consciousness. But at the bonfire, you can feel the consciousness there. Sometimes I really used to feel as if I would open my eyes after meditating and see her standing by the urn (2001).
The Mother’s proximity is underscored by the recording of her voice. At the beginning of the bonfire, around 5:30 a.m., the original recording from 1968 of the Mother playing the organ and reading the Charter is played. This re-staging of the original, ritualized reading of the community’s core text serves as a reminder of the Mother’s presence, her vision for humanity, and the commitment required for living in Auroville. It is yet another example of the overwhelming salience that the Mother’s words, in addition to the writings of Sri Aurobindo on which the Mother’s own work was built, have for being an Aurovilian.

As I have argued repeatedly, however, when the sun comes up and the bonfire is over, there are multiple ways in which Aurovilians might see the importance of the Charter, not to mention interpret it and try to go about putting it into action. Perhaps it is for this very reason that reiterating it on occasions such as this one becomes so important for promoting Auroville’s continued development. The recording, like the innumerable instances of citation in everyday life, is a performative effort towards bringing about that to which it refers.

In convening with the Mother’s force, and in rallying around the Charter as a common point of reference, Aurovilians also convene with one another. Auroville is spread out and life unfolds on disperse fronts. People come from all parts of the world and in many ways, might not have much in common. While officially they share an aspiration to build the Mother’s city, they have very
different ideas about how to go about it. The human unity to which Auroville aspires is something which under present conditions must be staged theatrically, rather than manifest fully. While the tensions and conflicts of everyday life make feeling that one belongs to something larger than oneself unpleasant or difficult, the staged tranquility of the bonfire provides a space in which to feel that one is part of a collective body. In the meaningful silence that follows the reading of the Charter, all the disparate voices coalesce. As one woman told me:

KLARA: I saw my neighbor XX, you know the one I had that fight with. Somehow seeing her there [at the bonfire] I felt so relieved. I thought, “It doesn’t matter what we do. We are both Mother’s children.” When the fire was done and people were moving out we hugged one another. So, it’s like that, I think. The bonfire is one time when you can feel happy with others like in a family together, the way we are supposed to here in Auroville (2000)!

The bonfire creates a great sense of oneness amongst residents, what Victor Turner famously identified as the *communitas* (1969) towards which so much ritual aspires.

Yet conflicts brew just below the surface. Interestingly, the original ceremony in 1968 was equally plagued by tension and disagreement, although people look back and remember its highlights. One eyewitness, who remained anonymous, detailed in *A V Today*:

Over the years I’ve been trying to recall it as a glorious time when we all worked harmoniously together under the directions of the Mother. But it wasn’t like that. It was a mess. For four months everyone disagreed,
argued, contradicted each other, worked at cross-purposes, fought for their own version of things (Anonymous 2003).

The Auroville of today continues to stand at the crossroads of aspiration and conflict. The bonfire ritual is but an encapsulation of what I have been talking about elsewhere in this dissertation. In 2001 the bonfire to commemorate Sri Aurobindo’s birthday on August 15 didn’t happen. Although the event is organized by a group of Aurovilian volunteers, the amphitheater falls under the auspices of the Matrimandir management. The management, and others in the community, voiced concern about the growing numbers of noisy outsiders attending the event. In the past people felt certain that it was the simple breakfast snacks served afterwards that drew large numbers of boisterous village children. So the snacks were cut out at some point. But the visitors continued. Most of them were local people from the surrounding area or from Pondicherry, who apparently came for the spectacle of it all. Not aware of the ritual’s ropes, they often did not conform to the accepted conduct, such as maintaining silence, staying on the proper paths, not running up to the flames, etc. Such intrusion threatened the aura of sacredness at the heart of the event. As a result, the management in February 2001 decreed that while there would be a “silent gathering,” there would be no bonfire.

It is not surprising that many Aurovilians objected. A friend vehemently expressed to me that without the fire, there would be no “collective fire” for Auroville for the coming year. Several people I heard objecting to the autocratic
nature of the Matrimandir Management’s decision. One person just told me, “But it’s always been with fire.” Against all these objections the “bonfire” was actually carried out without the fire that time around. So great was the backlash, however, that it was reinstated later.

The “problem” of the outsiders continues, however. That there should be local people disrupting the ritual is ironic, as Auroville would not exist as it is today were it not for the labor of such people. Their bothersome presence at the bonfire underscores one of the deepest contradictions in Auroville, namely its simultaneous rejection of and deep connection with the wider world of India that surrounds it. This contradiction works its way into the event aesthetically as well, because the floral patterns which decorate the ground around the fire are drawn from the South Indian tradition of pu kolams. Thus, while the event is about creating a moment out of time in which to live what it really means to be an Aurovilian, its performance reveals the complex relationship that identity has with the others who make it possible.

The problems that take place “behind the scenes” are not going to go away soon. More people will be drawn to Auroville for all kinds of reasons as it becomes more and more of a city. And the importance that people – both inside and outside of Auroville – attribute to the place will coalesce, diverge and dovetail with its significance as detailed by the Mother. For example, in February 2005 a
contingent from UNESCO will arrive in the community as part of an international conference for and about youth. The UNESCO people will probably be in attendance at the bonfire as well, finding their own significance in the Charter and drawing their own conclusions about how Aurovilians have been staging it so far.

As for what challenges and disparate viewpoints will signify for Auroville’s future, from my point of view, there is every reason to conclude that the bonfire will continue as it has for all these years. That Auroville has come this far would seem to suggest that something is going on that keeps the place dynamically alive. For many Aurovilians this is by virtue of the sheer force of the divine consciousness. But perhaps it is also because of the inspiring, yet open-ended nature of the script. There are many things that the Mother did not specify. But what she set down is so inspiring that people are willing to dedicate a good part of their lives to reflecting about it and coming up with creative ways to enact it. As the monumental performance of a vision for an ideal society, the actors under the Mother’s direction are going to keep rehearsing. How the final production will look as and when the curtain finally goes up is anybody’s guess. The uncertainty is one of the most exciting parts of the whole thing. Auroville is a cliff-hanger.

To conclude, while myriad social or religious movements have directed themselves towards creating places for engineering new ways of life, not so many have set their sights on a city, remaining instead as small rural settlements. At the
same time, most utopian communities have notoriously failed to bring about the conditions or created the citizens that their planners hoped to achieve. In the face of this history, Auroville’s goals are tremendously ambitious. The physical and social conditions in which those goals are to be realized present incredible challenges. Any effort can only be problematic, whether because inevitably conflicts arise among the citizens or troublesome relations develop with those outsiders who provide physical labor. These and other problems fly in the face of aspirations for harmony and human unity. Therefore, it is easy to dismiss Auroville for its compromises and disappointments. Yet to do so is as one-sided as to blindly celebrate Auroville’s achievements. Auroville’s infrastructural and institutional accomplishments are many. The diversity of its population is extraordinary. And the community’s commitment, after more than thirty years, to realizing an actual, lived human unity, is still going strong. Whether one chooses to conceptualize Auroville’s progress as the result of divine destiny or as evidence of the collective power of human beings, two things are certain: Auroville is a place whose history and character make it unlike any other. And ultimately, it is a tribute to the undying promise that ideas about urbanity and utopia hold for creative efforts to organize and perfect human life.
APPENDIX I

The Mother's Dream

There should be somewhere upon earth a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of goodwill, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme Truth; a place of peace, concord, harmony, where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his suffering and misery, to surmount his weakness and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and the care for progress would get precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the seeking for pleasures and material enjoyments. In this place, children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their soul.

Education would be given, not with a view to passing examinations and getting certificates and posts, but for enriching the existing faculties and bringing forth new ones. In this place, titles and positions would be supplanted by opportunities to serve and organize. The needs of the body will be provided for equally in the case of each and everyone. In general, intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority will find expression not in the enhancement of pleasures and powers of life but in the increase of duties and responsibilities. Artistic beauty in all forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, will be available to all, the opportunity to share in the joys they bring being limited solely by each one's capacities and not by social or financial position. In this ideal place money would be no more the sovereign lord. Individual merit will have a greater importance than the value of material wealth and social position. Work would not be there as the means of gaining one's livelihood, it would be the means whereby to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service to the whole group, which on its side would provide for each one's subsistence and for the field of his work. In brief, it would be a place where the relations among human beings, usually based almost exclusively upon competition and strife would be replaced by relations of emulation for doing better, for collaboration, relations of real brotherhood.

Pondicherry
1954
APPENDIX II

The Auroville Charter

1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.

2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.

3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realizations.

4. Auroville be the site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.
APPENDIX III
Interviews Cited

Al (USA, long-term) August 26, 2001
Alicia (Dutch, mid-term, teacher) June 4, 2000
Andre (French, mid-term, photographer) October 11, 2001
Bani (Indian, mid-term, writer) July 8, 2000
Frank (Dutch, born AV) September 4, 2000
Francois Gautier (French, journalist) January 17, 2000
Hans (Dutch, mid-term, social work) September 28, 2000
Indrajit (Indian, mid-term) October 5, 2002
John (British, mid-term, actor) November 2, 2000
Juliette (French, former AV, actor) September 26, 2000
Karl (German, mid-term) January 6, 2003
Krishna (Indian, long-term) April 4, 2001
Kuppan (Indian, long-term) June 16, 2001
Lisa (Australian, mid-term) September 19, 2001
Marc (French, long-term) October 23, 2001
Maurice (Belgium, Newcomer) October 1, 2001
Michelle (French, long-term) October 19, 2001
Mira (USA, mid-term) September 2, 2000
Molly (Dutch, mid-term) July 28, 2001

1 The names in this list are pseudonyms to assure the anonymity of interviewees. Throughout the dissertation I use actual names only for public figures or published authors.
2 I use “long-term” to identify anyone who has lived in Auroville 15 years or longer. “Mid-term” indicates a person has lived in the community from 5-14 years.
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