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Towards a Spiritualised Society:
Auroville, An Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism

Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith

SUBMITTED FOR DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

NOVEMBER 2019

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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THESIS SUBMITTED FOR DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TOWARDS A SPIRITUALISED SOCIETY: AUROVILLE, AN EXPERIMENT IN PREFIGURATIVE UTOPIANISM

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an autoethnographic examination of the intentional community "Auroville," located in Tamil Nadu, South India, as a site of utopian practice. I begin by situating Auroville within the broader, historical context of the intentional community movement and its academic literature, to which I contribute previously under-explored insider perceptions and experiences that offer significant insight into how utopian practice is animated, engaged, and sustained. Building on recent utopian scholarship that emphasises the critically engaged, concretely applied, and progressive nature of utopian practice, I further theorise such practice as prefigurative in the Auroville context, specifically as spiritually prefigurative, given that it seeks to anticipate and incarnate a spiritually evolved society. My ethnographic research, undertaken as a participant-observer, researcher-member of the Auroville community, focuses on how the founding spiritual ideals of this experimental township are, and have been, embodied and articulated in its socio-political and socio-economic organisation, development, and praxis. This exploration proved revelatory of the strategic role and influence of spirituality in inspiring, informing and sustaining its utopian practice, enriching an emerging body of literature that examines the prevalence of spirituality in contemporary, prefigurative left social movements. As a detailed empirical study, it contributes to the record of communal economic models, and anarchist forms of organisation, administration and decision-making, offering analytical insights that are relevant both for Auroville and for other contemporary collectives that enact these alternative practices. These raise important considerations related to the institutionalisation and perpetuation of the latter, a matter of significant activist and academic debate that reaches beyond intentional community contexts. Specifically, the uniquely semi-institutionalised organisational structure of the Auroville community ensures its perpetuation while preserving the opportunity for open-ended reformulation, both of which are key to sustaining its utopian practice. This original, autoethnographic scholarship thus furthers theoretical understandings of, and offers pragmatic insights into, how communal utopian practice is enabled, challenged, and sustained – relevant to fostering such practice within and beyond the Auroville experiment.

“By Thy stumblings the world is perfected.” Sri Aurobindo

For Auroville,
and to my fellow Aurovilians.

Fig. 1. “The Spirit of Auroville.” Painting by Huta D. Hindocha, 1966.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS **9**

1 INTRODUCTION **10**

1.1 A Personal Premise **10**

1.2 Scope of Scholarship **16**

1.3 What is Research in the Context of Auroville? **20**

2 METHODOLOGY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS **23**

2.1 Methods **23**

2.2 Situating the Autoethnographic Nature of my Research **26**

2.3 Reflexivity and Subjectivity **29**

2.4 My Personal PhD Journey **33**

2.5 The Autoethnographic Challenge to Self-Understanding **39**

2.6 Personal Empowerment or Ethnography at Home **41**

3 CONTEXTUALISING AUROVILLE: THE INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY PHENOMENON **46**

3.1 Intentional Communities: A Historical Introduction **48**
3.1.1 Spiritual, Religious, and Secular Roots of Intentional Communities 48
3.1.2 The 'first wave' of utopian societies 49
3.1.3 Government-Incentivised Intentional Communities 53
3.1.4 The second wave: "hippie communes" 54
3.1.5 "Eco & Co": The third wave? 56

3.2 From Ashram to Utopian Society: Indian Articulations of Intentional Community **57**

3.3 Intentional Community Scholarship **62**
3.3.1 My Contributions to Intentional Scholarship 65

4 UNDERSTANDING AUROVILLE AS A 'UTOPIAN' COMMUNITY **69**

4.1 The Evolution of Utopian Practice and its Theorisation **71**
4.1.1 A Note on 'Hope,' Disappointment, and Criticism 76

4.2 Utopian Practice and Prefiguration **80**
4.2.1 Prefiguration, Utopianism, and Social Change 83

4.3 The Integral, Spiritually Prefigurative Nature of Auroville's Utopian Practice **87**

4.4 Auroville as a Utopian Community **93**

4.5 A New Theoretical Approach **99**

5 AUROVILLE, PREFIGURING A UTOPIAN ANARCHIC POLITY? 101

5.1 The ideal of a 'Divine Anarchy' 102

5.2 A Government-Enabled Anarchy? 105
5.2.1 The Auroville Foundation 105
5.2.2 Divine Intervention? The Passing of the Auroville Foundation Act 109
5.2.3 National and Supranational Endorsement of Auroville 112
5.2.4 Auroville Foundation Act: Facilitating a government-enabled anarchy 114
5.2.5 Alter-Development and the State 116

5.3 Auroville's Self-Governance 118
5.3.1 Residents' Assembly & Working Groups 119
5.3.2 General Meetings 124
5.3.3 Voting in Auroville 127

5.4 Auroville's Working Groups – From A Direct to a Representative Democracy? 129
5.4.1 From a "Representative" to a "Participatory" Group: The Case of the FAMC 129
5.4.2 Issues related to Membership in "Participatory" and "Representative" Groups 131
5.4.3 Alternatives to Consider 133

5.5 Conclusion: Is an Anarchist Polity a Utopia? 135

6 SPIRITUALITY AND PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS IN THE AUROVILLE CONTEXT 138

6.1 Case-Study: Auroville's "Selection Process" 142
6.1.1 Attending the Selection Process 143
6.1.2 The Setting 147

6.2 Prompting Spiritually Prefigurative Political Praxis 149
6.2.1 Embodying Spiritually Prefigurative States 149
6.2.2 Prompting Strategic Spirituality 152

6.3 Spirituality and Participatory Politics 154
6.3.1 Engaging with the Auroville Charter 157

6.4 Spiritual Motivations for Process Participation 159

6.5 Relating with Spiritual Legacy: Recordings of The Mother 162

6.6 The Consensus Process: Prefiguring Participatory Decision-Making? 166

6.7 Conclusion: Spiritual Practice and Political Praxis 172

7 AUROVILLE'S COMMUNAL ECONOMY: IDEALS, REALITIES, AND (D?)EVOLUTION ... 174

7.1 Sri Aurobindo Ashram: The Prototype for Auroville's Economic Organisation 176
7.1.1 "Concrete Utopia": The Prefigurative Rationale for Auroville's Economy 177
7.1.2 Economic Ideals for Auroville 180

7.2 Collective Provisioning: Early Years and Rupture 183
7.2.1 The emergence of Auroville's current economic "system" 188

7.3 Departures from Auroville's Founding Communal Economic Principles 190
7.3.1 The 33% Contribution Policy, or the policing of economic solidarity 192
7.3.2 On Self-Supporting Services, or the permeation of capitalist logic 197

7.4 Maintenances: The Individualised Component of Collective Provisioning 200
7.4.1 Maintenances and the ideal of "no exchange of money" 201
7.4.2 On the basis of need – the allocation of City Services Maintenances 202
7.4.3 Standardised City Services Maintenances – balancing individual and collective provisioning 203

7.5 Conclusion: Subjective Objectivity, or the Bureaucratisation of Anarchy 205

8 THE INSTITUTIONAL POTENTIAL OF PREFIGURATIVE EXPERIMENTS: COLLECTIVE ACCOUNTS IN AUROVILLE 209

8.1 Common Accounts 210
8.1.1 Introduction: The Common Account 211
8.1.2 "Seed": Auroville's oldest common account 213
8.1.3 Circles: A first attempt at scaling the practice of common accounts 218
8.1.4 Prosperity: Connecting common accounts experiments with social Services 221

8.2 Pour Tous Distribution Centre 223
8.2.1 The Emergence of PTDC 223
8.2.2 PTDC 2018 226
8.2.3 To what extent is PTDC Prefigurative in the Auroville Context? 232
8.2.4 Prefiguring Institutional Economic Relationships 235

8.3 Conclusion: Approximating a Spiritualised Society 238

9 CONCLUSION 242

9.1 Theoretical Horizons 243
9.1.1 Occupy Prefiguration 243
9.1.2 Institutionalising Prefigurative Practice 244
9.1.3 Prefiguring Utopianism, Spiritualising Utopianism 246

9.2 Contextually Grounded Hopes 248

9.3 Personal Reformulations 250

APPENDIX 253

A: A Dream 253

B: Auroville Charter 254

C: To Be a True Aurovilian 255

D: Material Conditions for living in Auroville 256

BIBILIOGRAPHY 257

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1 Introduction

"Auroville is a community dedicated to working on process in an attempt to develop living forms, both external architectural and environmental forms, and internal styles of human relations, which will transcend our present level of community living which is fraught with such heavy penalties to human beings and to the global environment. I believe that Auroville deserves… at least narrative records of what is happening."[1] Margaret Mead.

1.1 A Personal Premise

In 1968 young people throughout Europe and North America insisted that "Another world is possible," and sought to claim and enact it. The spirit and culture of this revolution were in part informed by the concurrent popularisation of Indian spirituality – forever immortalised in the Beatles' song "Across the Universe"[2] – which offered tools for individual emancipation that were seen as necessary to accompany and realise the transformation sought for society at large. In the years leading up to 1968, in India, two 'spiritual activists'[3] – Sri Aurobindo (1872 – 1950), a revolutionary in India's independence movement who had turned to spirituality to further the work of realising an emancipated society,[4] and The Mother (1878 – 1973), his partner in this socio-spiritual undertaking[5] – had begun (r)evolutionising the yoga tradition. Rather than individual enlightenment achieved through ascetic withdrawal, the premise of Integral Yoga was the spiritualisation of all aspects not only of self, but of society.

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[1] Margaret Mead, Letter to Whom it May Concern, Oct 30, 1973.

[2] The Beatles, "Across the Universe," recorded Feb 4, 1968. See https://www.thebeatles.com/song/across-universe, accessed Sep 13, 2019.

[3] On Integral Yoga and spiritual activism, see Charles Ismael Flores, "Integral Yoga Activism: An Exploration of Its Foundational Elements and Practices" (PhD diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 2009).

[4] For a biography of Sri Aurobindo, see Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[5] For a biography of The Mother, see Georges van Vrekhem, *The Mother: The Story of Her Life* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2000).

Auroville was founded in Tamil Nadu, South India in 1968 by The Mother, as an experimental township dedicated to this endeavour. The project drew both young Westerners stirred by the radical period of '68, seeking for alternative ways of living, as well as young Indian and foreign members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where The Mother resided, in nearby Pondicherry. Local Tamilians came to Auroville looking for work, some integrating the community with their families.

My father, who joined Auroville in 1975, counted among the young protestors of the late 1960s and early 1970s, barricading the streets of London. But unlike his friends at the time, who were focussed on "the revolution" (another famous slogan of 1968 was "Une seule solution, la revolution": "Only one solution, the revolution!") his burning question was what are we going to do once we win it, and in Auroville he found the answer, a work in progress towards a new society. Janaka, who arrived in 1969 as part of a caravan that left France for Auroville in 1969, recalls that it was

> about a month after the Americans had taken their first steps on the moon, they were trying to see if they could change humanity by going to the moon, and well, as for us, we also thought we would change humanity by coming to Auroville to join this experience, and for 50 years we've been in the process, actually.[6]

Aster Patel, an Indian graduate of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram International Centre of Education, Pondicherry, was a student at the Sorbonne in Paris, at the heart of the students' revolt in May 1968. The Mother showed a keen interest in the latter, asking Aster to write to her about its developments. When Aster completed her doctorate in philosophy on Sri Aurobindo – on February 28, 1970, two years after Auroville's founding – she returned to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram,

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[6] Janaka, in @aurovillearts "1 Minute video for Janaka from Centre d'art: LA CARAVANE INTERIEURE," Instagram video, Sep 30, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B3CEkE1F6p6/?igshid=9uynnl3aqmre&fbclid=IwAR3hH8EvVNMnEzJK7LreOTjDiQiNct0qJDBVvTsEA5UTen1o2HFfA4fqUZ8.

where she had grown up. The Mother asked her to work in Auroville, and Aster is an active member of the community to this day.[7]

Gandhimatti,[8] a 6-year old Tamil girl, arrived in 1972 with her parents, from the town of Tindivanam. Her father had simply intended to come work as a labourer, but the family joined the community as Aurovilians in 1975. Gandhimatti was raised and educated in Auroville, where she continues to live and work. "I still do my service for The Mother, like my parents did, I am sure," she tells me, brightly and candidly.[9]

Fig. 2. "Auroville landscape in early days."[10]

50 years after its founding, Auroville is the largest, most diverse, and amongst the longest-standing intentional communities in the world, with approximately 3000 members of over 58 nationalities, half of which are Indian

[7] Email to Author, October 18, 2019.
[8] Pseudonym.
[9] Interview with "Gandhimatti," March 15, 2018.
[10] "Environmental Work," *Auroville*, last updated Dec 5, 2016, Auroville, n.d., https://www.auroville.org/contents/516.

citizens – and in which I was born (1987) and raised, and am a current resident. It is endorsed and funded by the Government of India, UNESCO, and other international governmental and non-governmental bodies who consider Auroville to be pioneering a model human society. Such embeddedness and recognition within the public sphere is exceptional among intentional communities,[11] some having faced moral and legal persecution.[12] So is its longevity and breadth. The vast majority of such communal, societal experiments are small in size and short-lived, 80% do not last longer than 2 years.[13]

While other contemporary intentional communities are typically limited to a specific set of aims, be these environmental, economic, educational or spiritual, Auroville strives towards a new paradigm of society in which "all life is yoga."[14] Under this aspirational aegis, a multiplicity of pursuits are undertaken by individual community members, from art to engineering, as well as the development of innovative and alternative forms and practices at the communal level, for example of governance, economics and education.

The township is located in the state of Tamil Nadu, a few kilometres from the Indian coastal town of Puducherry, on a plateau ecologically restored and afforested in the community's pioneering years. Its current infrastructure includes residential settlements, schools and libraries, sports facilities, health and healing arts centres, multimedia performance venues and exhibition spaces, community canteens, restaurants and cafés, as well as small to medium scale (predominantly

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[11] Notable exceptions are Findhorn and Damanhur, who close to match Auroville in longevity, and have also garnered significant recognition.

[12] Such as Rajneeshpuram and Oneida.

[13] Jaya Priya Reinhalther, "Intentional Communities: Place-Based Articulations of Social Critique" (MA thesis, University of Hawai'i Manoa, 2014).

[14] Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 23, *The Synthesis of Yoga – I* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1999), 8. Note: all of Sri Aurobindo's works are accessible online at https://incarnateword.in.

crafts) industries, institutes for scientific and educational research, a Town Hall and Visitors Centre, and at the centre of the community, the Matrimandir, a space for spiritual concentration.

Fig.3. The Matrimandir, Auroville.[15]

This "City" area is surrounded by a "Green Belt" of farms, forest, ecological centres and botanical gardens. Auroville's town plan projects a city of 50,000 permanent residents, occupying a circular area of about 20 square kilometres, and the community currently owns approximately 80% of its designated "City" area and 40% of its designated "Green Belt", its land holdings interspersed with farmland owned by local Tamilians – some of whom are also members of the Auroville community.[16]

[15] Fred Cebron, "Matrimandir Aerial View," n.d., Photograph, Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.

[16] COLAAP, Land for Auroville, accessed Feb 27, 2017, http://www.colaap.org.

Despite Auroville's apparently established 'success,' coupled with a positive personal experience of growing up in, and choosing to return to the community as an adult, I nonetheless questioned whether we were *actually* engaged in prefiguring our societal ideals. With this doctoral research, I sought to address whether and how Auroville's ideals were concretely articulated in its development as a society, and what sustained this process – one that I theorise as "prefigurative utopian practice."

Gaining such insight, I felt, would be relevant not only to Auroville, but also for other collective attempts at embodying and socially reproducing new paradigms of society, according to alternative and progressive ideals. Intentional communities are key sites of utopian practice,[17] hence Auroville makes for an especially rich and relevant site for this research, given its exceptional combination of longevity, size, scope of activity, recognition, aims and experimental ethos. Furthermore, my undertaking this project in Auroville as a researcher-member is uniquely and significantly able to complement and deepen our understanding of such experiments in alternative society, especially given that autoethnographic academic work on intentional communities is scarce.[18] It also facilitates my capacity to gift this knowledge back, in a dialogical process. As David Graeber has said,

> [O]ne obvious role for a radical intellectual is . . . to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as

[17] Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000).

[18] The only academic monograph to date is Barry Shenker's *Intentional Communities: Ideology and Alienation in Communal Societies* (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). A more recent academic project is by my peer, Maël Vidal, who undertook research for his Masters Thesis on Auroville in 2018: Maël Vidal "Manifesting the Invisible" (MA thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2018). Maël had not lived in the community since his childhood, however.

> contributions, possibilities – as gifts… such a project would actually have two aspects, or moments if you like: one ethnographic, one utopian, suspended in constant dialogue.[19]

1.2 Scope of Scholarship

Unlike many previous historical attempts at creating utopian communities, which sought to enact predetermined, theoretically perfect, societies – and invariably failed to do so – The Mother conceived of Auroville as a collective, evolutionary experiment in embodying a spiritualised society, one that could not be anticipated but instead would have to be progressively elaborated through experimentation and applied spirituality.[20] The core argument of this thesis is that Auroville is engaged in, and helps us to define, a prefigurative practice of utopianism, and that spirituality is instrumental in fuelling such practice. As an empirical body of work, it furthers theoretical understandings of, and offers pragmatic insights into, how utopian practice is enabled, challenged, and sustained.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I explore the autoethnographic dimension of this research: the motives, ethics, challenges, and rewards of conducting ethnography at home. The subjective nature of my research could raise concerns related to a lack of distanciation, yet it is precisely my long-standing, embodied immersion in Auroville that allows me to produce an original contribution to knowledge. I intentionally harnessed subjective sensibilities and experiential insights born from my experience of being an active participant in the Auroville experiment to reflect on and convey its practice, and conducted the

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[19] David Graeber, *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2004).

[20] See "Early Talks," in *Collected Works of The Mother,* Vol. 13*, Words of The Mother – I,* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003), 251 - 276. Note: all of The Mother's works are accessible online at https://incarnateword.in.

majority of my participant-observation in spheres of community life that a non-member would not have been granted access to.

Chapter 3 situates Auroville within the historical context of intentional communities, and the Indian tradition of spiritual communities, 'ashrams.' In so doing, it acknowledges that the Auroville project is not an isolated experiment, while pointing out key points of differentiation from previous and contemporary forms, affirming the relevance of exploring Auroville as a singularly significant case-study of a broader phenomenon in human history and contemporary society. The chapter explores the body of scholarship on intentional community, and finds this literature to be primarily focused on documenting the alternative practices and forms of social organisation of historical intentional communities, rather than understanding the processes by which these are embodied, enacted, and sustained. The latter is the crux of my research, uniquely facilitated by its autoethnographic nature.

In Chapter 4, I outline the unique, theoretical framework of "prefigurative utopianism," the analytical lens through which I understand Auroville's practice of developing a spiritualised society, and one that I find to be congruent with its self-understandings. My basis is a recent body of utopian scholarship that radically reconceptualises the "utopian" as dynamic, critically engaged, and transformative of present conditions, concerned with progress rather than perfection. I then apply the concept of prefiguration to this theorisation, one that refers to the embodiment in the present of attitudes, practices, and forms of organising envisioned for the future.

The following four chapters consist of the ethnographic portion of this thesis, in which I examine aspects of, and practices within, the political and

economic organisation of Auroville, revealing how these articulate the community's ideals and enact a prefigurative utopian practice. In addition to furthering theoretical understandings of utopian practice, this thesis thus also contributes to the empirical record of anarchist forms of organisation and decision-making, and alternative communal economic models, offering pragmatic insights into prefiguring alternative societies, relevant for Auroville and other such experiments. These raise important considerations related to the institutionalisation and perpetuation of the latter, a matter of significant activist and academic debate that reaches beyond intentional community contexts.

Chapter 5 examines the anarchic ideals and organisation of Auroville as a polity, and how these are linked to its evolutionary project of prefiguring a spiritualised society. It considers the early leadership of The Mother, the later incorporation of the Auroville community as a Foundation under the Human Resources Ministry of the Indian government, and current trends in the development of its internal political organisation that point to departures from anarchic models, while also revealing what may be their inherent limitations.

Chapter 6 is an autoethnographic exploration of a collective decision-making process in Auroville that is prefigurative of a spiritualised political forum. I explore the experiences of enacting practices designed to facilitate the embodiment of spiritually conscious states, as well that of spirituality-informed activities designed to strategically inform participation and decision-making. Such experiences are revelatory of the shared and contested ways in which Aurovilians relate to the community's spiritual heritage, and of the challenge and potential for spiritually prefigurative politics.

The next two chapters are dedicated to Auroville's collective economic experimentation and organisation. In examining the intentional and reflexive processes through which Aurovilians have initiated and developed the latter, they reveal how the community's economic ideals are, and have been, articulated in practice, making a unique contribution to economic anthropology. They also supplement, and significantly further the understandings to be drawn from, a chronicling of Auroville's economic practices undertaken in a historical (1968 – 2008) economic study of the community.[21]

Chapter 7 explores the historical development of Auroville's communal economic organisation, as well as key issues in its current economic administration. In so doing it reveals the legal, financial, and administrative challenges of prefiguring an alternative economy, and how the community's founding economic ideals have and continue to underpin this process, reflecting the critical and reflexive nature of Auroville's utopian practice. Chapter 8 traces a series of experiments in common accounts that have been key to prefiguring economic institutions within Auroville, affirming the potential of experimental practices for modelling new forms of social organisation.

Data collection for this research was undertaken primarily in Auroville, through ethnographic means. I am grateful to the Auroville Working Groups that welcomed my presence at their meetings, the many Aurovilians who I interviewed and corresponded with, as well as the Auroville Archives and Social Research Centre for providing me with relevant records. The community considers its praxis to be a form of research itself, and I thus consider it important to introduce its

[21] Henk Thomas and Manuel Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008* (Auroville: Social Research Center, 2013).

endemic conceptualisation of research before delving into this autoethnographic, yet academic research thesis on Auroville.

1.3 What is Research in the Context of Auroville?

Auroville's founder, The Mother, was clear about the central place of research for this experimental township; out of the four points of the *Auroville Charter*, two make reference to it:

> Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity.
>
> 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 realisations.

Auroville's mandate, in essence, was to practically research into – in other words, prefigure – an integral transformation of society, across fields, connecting inner and outer dimensions of life. In its first 50 years, animated by this vision, the community has established a basis of applied experimentation in a number of key domains – artistic, cultural, social, economical, environmental, educational and spiritual.

"Research" in Auroville thus has its own endemic conceptualisation, closely tied to the community's ideals, and to prefigurative practice inspired by these. In 2016, a group of us circulated a survey titled "What is Research in the Context of Auroville?", through which we sought to arrive at an improved understanding of how research and experimentation is currently understood and undertaken in the community.[22] This was especially revelatory of the perceived, prefiguratively utopian role and nature of research in Auroville:

> Research is, in a way, the evolutionary method for Auroville – the way by which it is meant to grow and awaken and evolve […] It is a place for experiments of all kinds, on all levels and layers of existence and consciousness. In a way, research

[22] Suryamayi Clarence-Smith et al, "What is Research in the Context of Auroville?," 2016.

> could simply be another word for Yoga if done in the right Spirit and with a Sincere Will to Grow and become more Conscious.[23]

The practice of research in Auroville is diverse, encompassing academic, applied, action, and subjective research, with the latter category comprehending a broad range of spiritual inquiry that individuals and collectives perform towards prefiguratively embodying Auroville's ideals, in a number of fields. Forms of research in Auroville include scientific studies on afforestation,[24] the development of sustainable architectural models for human habitat, [25] art inspired by spirituality,[26] the elaboration of alternative collective economic models,[27] and the development of consciousness in education, constituting primarily of experimental praxis.[28]

Professor Emeritus Heidi Watts, who has mentored educational practice in Auroville for the past thirty years, highlights this emphasis on experimental research in the community, which she terms "research with a small r" ("an attempt to try out something new, to test a theory, an idea, a product and approach"), contrasting with formal research, "Research with a big R" ("which is what happens

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[23] Participant response to survey "What is Research in the Context of Auroville?"

[24] Paul Blanchflower, "Restoration of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest of Peninsular India," *Biodiversity* 6, no. 3 (2005): 17 – 24.

[25] Such as the residential project "Humanscapes." See "Humanscapes at The Bridge," Auroville Outreach Media, accessed Oct 2, 2019, https://vimeo.com/262528899.

[26] A recent example is the weeklong "Auroville Art Camp," hosted in March 2019, in which Aurovilian and Indian artists together explored the theme "A New World." See "Auroville Art Camp 2019 | A New World is Possible," Auroville Outreach Media, accessed Aug 20, 2019, http://www.outreachmedia.auroville.org/auroville-art-camp-2019/.

[27] Such as by Auroville's "Lotus Group." See "CAT12: Progressive Economy," Auroville RadioTV, accessed Aug 20, 2019, https://www.aurovilleradio.org/cat12-progressive-economy/.

[28] Such as the Auroville community's flagship integral yoga practice "Awareness Through the Body," incorporated in Auroville's schools and taught internationally. See the Awareness Through the Body website, accessed Aug 20, 2019, https://awarenessthroughthebody.wordpress.com.

when that test is subjected to certain clearly defined boundaries and restraints: limits as to time, place, experimenter, scope, range and variables").[29]

While some in Auroville see the value of 'Research with a big R' for assessing and communicating the applied and embodied experimentation that is happening in our community, many are critical of an academic exercise like this doctoral research project, for they consider it to be dissociated from life, and thus ineffectual in its transformational potential; unable to read and value the spiritual underpinnings of the project of Auroville, and by extension its research practice. As a community member who is sympathetic to these concerns, I have aspired to engage with and communicate this research in ways that respond to them, while also challenging their absolutism. The following chapter explores my intentions and approach to this project, which are rooted in my own spiritual experience and practice of Integral Yoga, and highlights how my undertaking this research has contributed not only to furthering my intellectual understanding of Auroville, but also catalysed various forms of engagement with the community, empowering my personal articulation with and enactment of its ideals.

[29] Heidi Watts, "Research: Large 'R' or small?" *Ritam*, *The bi-annual Auroville journal* (August 2003): 14-16.

2 Methodology: An Autoethnographic Process

"*Knowledge can only come by conscious identity, for that is the only true knowledge – existence, aware of itself.*"[1] Sri Aurobindo.

2.1 Methods

I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Auroville for this project from July 2017 to May 2018. I spent a significant amount of time as an observer, or participant-observer, of community-wide meetings,[2] and those of Auroville's "Working Groups"[3] – even joining certain administrative groups as a result.[4] I conducted 16 expert and 12 life history interviews with Aurovilians, and countless other informal conversations. I also participated in numerous celebratory gatherings and performances for the community's 50th anniversary,[5] which fell within the timeframe of my fieldwork.

Once in the field I quickly chose to base my research almost exclusively on participant-observation, for a number of reasons. Interviewing Aurovilians is almost always an incredibly rich experience, for me personally in terms of the deepening of relationships it facilitates with fellow community members I already know, and the opportunity for connection it offers with those I do not – something

[1] Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 21, *The Life Divine – I* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970), 213.

[2] During the course of my fieldwork, I attended 8 "General Meetings," 2 Selection Processes (for members of Auroville's Working Groups), 3 "Create Auroville Together" community forums, and one of the bi-annual meetings of Auroville's "Governing Board" – a board of advisors appointed by the Indian government.

[3] Auroville "Working Groups" are groups of people responsible for administering various aspects of community life. I attended meetings of the major economic Working Groups: the Funds and Assets Management Committee, the Budget Coordination Committee, the Auroville Board of Commerce, the Auroville Board of Services. I also attended meetings of the Forest Group.

[4] I served as a resource person for two subgroups of the Auroville Council, and as a member of a selection and allocation team for pro-bono housing for young people in Auroville.

[5] Such as the Dawnfire meditation and symbolic water ceremony held at the Matrimandir, Aurovillle's spiritual centre, for the 50th birthday on Feb 28th, 2018; The Bridge 50th anniversary conference, which I co-organised; the AuroSangaman festival, which celebrated the contribution of the Tamil heritage and local inhabitants in the development of Auroville.

I had experienced during the course of previous research in Auroville.[6] It also is almost invariably revelatory of spiritual dimensions of experience, understanding, and insight that inspire and guide individuals in their commitment to and engagement within the community. As such, conducting interview-based research within Auroville is both emotionally nurturing and spiritually inspiring, and would have been wonderful to pursue over the course of my fieldwork.

However, because of the richness that they yield both in terms of process and output, narrative methods are commonly used within Auroville; there is a strong focus on personal stories, especially in our own insider research – and often captured audio-visually. I could certainly have built on what has already been recorded, not only by capturing a further diversity of voices, but by undertaking an analysis of what are currently simply collections of individual stories.[7] Yet, what I observe in our community is that while the depth of individual experiences is easily accessible, within our community itself we struggle to understand how we are embodying our ideals at a collective level, something that is a source of frustration, disappointment, and distrust. I therefore chose to focus this thesis on my participant-observation of our collective forums.

My reason for undertaking the research primarily through participant-observation is also because I wished to do so as closely as possible as a community member instead of as a "researcher." I feel that this was something I could uniquely do as an Aurovilian; any researcher can conduct interviews and focus

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[6] For the conference paper "PTDC: Auroville's Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform of Conscious Citizenship," presented at the SASE Annual Conference 2016, University of California, Berkeley.

[7] Christine Devin, *Turning Points: An inner story of the beginnings of Auroville* (Auroville: Auroville Press, 2008); "The Children of Auroville: part Two, Here and Now," Auroville Video Productions, accessed Feb 21, 2017, https://vimeo.com/27938200.

groups, but very few can participate in community life in the way that I could. It was this grassroots experience that I wished to capture, and participant-observation was clearly the most appropriate research method for this. The exchanges being held in the context of interviews and focus groups cannot but anticipate a certain recorded output: an external audience is undeniably present on the horizon. Furthermore, there is quite a strong, shared discourse about Auroville when members communicate about it with an external audience, and this has made it difficult for other researchers to arrive at in-depth ethnographic understandings of our community when relying on interview methods.[8]

Of course, ethical considerations are paramount for an autoethnographer conducting participant observation: what exchanges are meant for, or presume to include me, solely on a personal basis, as a community member?[9] I decided I would rely heavily on the sharing of written work for feedback from those involved in generating it to answer this question – a time-consuming task, and one that ethnographers rarely recourse to for participant-observation. However, I felt this was paramount given my membership in the community. Furthermore, it would allow any concerns from community members related to how I interpreted certain exchanges to be revealed. Elaine Lawless, an ethnographer who suffered misunderstandings upon dissemination of her written work with research participants who had become friends, precisely due to her interpretations of their

[8] The graduate researcher Maël Vidal shared with me during our overlapping fieldwork periods in Auroville, that his supervisor Raphael Voix had warned him of this difficulty, based on Voix's concurrent experience in supervising an anthropological doctoral research project on Auroville by Marie Horassius.

[9] Elizabeth Enslin, "Beyond Writing: Feminist Practice and the Limitations of Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 4 (1994): 537-68, http://doi.org/10.1525/can.1994.9.4.02a00040.

experiences feeling incongruous to them, recommends that such dialogical processes be facilitated prior to final publication, and even featured within it.[10]

In my research process, I facilitated such forums of exchange at a much earlier stage even; it was not only my power of interpretation in the analytical stage that I was concerned about, but my power to define the very research agenda of this thesis on our community. I hosted two focus group discussions in Auroville when I was close to finalising my research outline, in which I shared the draft with participants beforehand, and asked them for feedback. Specifically, I asked them what they felt would be the most important aspects of our community to explore, within the scope of this project, and these discussions defined the areas of focus of my research, as did certain needs within the community during the course of my field research, which could be met by my participation as a researcher.

2.2 Situating the Autoethnographic Nature of my Research

Auroville is a physical, social, and spiritual community in which I was born and raised and with which I have enduring personal ties and involvement; during the course of my fieldwork I officially re-joined the community as a member after almost a decade spent living abroad. The ethnographic nature of my research is traditional in that its object of inquiry is a geographically situated society that is delimited from its surroundings by its social organisation, values, and membership – something that is no longer common. Anthropology has evolved in our globalised era to study topics such as transnationalism and flexible citizenship,[11] and ethnographic methods are used across disciplines in the social sciences and

[10] Elaine J. Lawless, "'I was afraid someone like you... an outsider... would misunderstand': negotiating interpretive differences between ethnographers and subjects," *The Journal of American Folklore* 105, no. 417 (Summer 1992): 302-314, http://doi.org/10.2307/541758.

[11] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

humanities to explore a wide range of social processes. What is unusual about it, both generally speaking and for research on Auroville specifically,[12] is that this ethnography has been undertaken by an insider, and is thus 'autoethnographic,' or 'native.'[13]

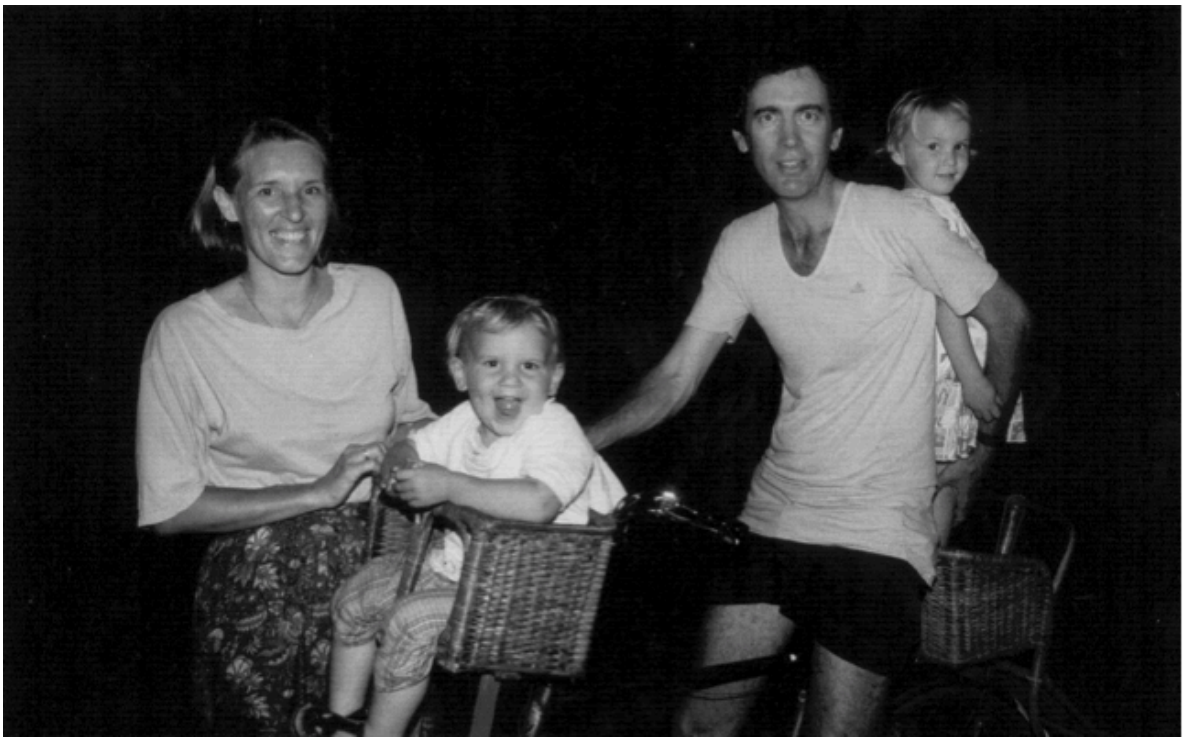

Fig.4 With my brother and parents in Auroville, 1991.

The original use of the term "autoethnography"[14] described research of and in one's own group, in which "the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being 'native,' acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied,"[15] and thus "fully committed to and

[12] See Auroville's repository of research, http://www.research.auroville.org.in, accessed Aug 20, 2019.

[13] Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1997). "Native anthropology" is a term proposed by Deborah Reed Danahay to describe research undertaken by members of geographically situated and culturally bound societies traditionally studied in anthropological scholarship.

[14] David Hayano, "Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects," *Human Organisation* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 1979): 99–104, http://doi.org/10.17730/humo.38.1.u761n5601t4g318v.

[15] Quoted in Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography (*Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2004), 38.

immersed in the group they study."[16] As such, the researcher is explicitly part of the phenomena under study, a dynamic that can shape methodology, analysis, and writing,[17] and which I experienced in all three. I wish to highlight this in my thesis, as I believe it can serve to shed some insight into an auto-ethnographic process, a practice that is still new to many. My doing so will in and of itself be demonstrative of "autoethnographic research" in another sense of the term: it has come to define not only research on one's 'own people,' but also "reflexive" [18] or "autobiographical" [19] ethnographies, in which researchers intentionally and explicitly examine their role in, and personal experiences as part of, an ethnographic project, and address the significance of this specifically in the process of inquiry, analysis, writing and any other outcomes of the research.

My research thus falls within both categories of autoethnography, a study of my own community in which I engage as both a researcher and community member, and one in which I intentionally choose to integrate my own personal experience as part of a "heuristic" research practice[20] that can serve to both illuminate and leverage my embeddedness in the inquiry. I believe this is valuable, because I am a product of the society I am researching, and doing so will necessarily be revelatory of the attitudes and values fostered in the Auroville context.

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[16] Ellis, *The Ethnographic I,* 48.

[17] Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*.

[18] Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2007); N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, 2000).

[19] Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1997); Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

[20] Lejla Voloder, "Autoethnographic Challenges: Confronting Self, Field and Home," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2008): 27–40, http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.2008.tb00104.x.

That said, I would like to emphasise that my personal experience should not be considered as representative of an overarching 'Auroville experience' simply because of my insider status. Many autoethnographers have already problematized the essentialist conceptions of affinity and sameness among members of a group that give rise to such assumptions.[21] Hayano, who coined the term 'auto-ethnography' points out that "Cultural 'realities' and interpretations of events among individuals in the same group are often highly variable, changing, or contradictory."[22] While I do intend to yield an insider perspective of the Auroville community, I strive for it to transcend the boundaries of my personal experience, in acknowledgement of the diversity of views and experiences of Aurovilians.

2.3 Reflexivity and Subjectivity

Some are critical of utilising and exposing reflexivity because the traditional ethnographer is mostly invisible,[23] their impersonality serving to promote the research endeavour as objective and scientific.[24] However, the "pretext of objectivity"[25] has been challenged by numerous ethnographers,[26] and even in natural scientific research, a fellow doctoral researcher in Physics has assured me. While traditional ethnographic accounts may not have always or often included self-reflection, Dumont remarks "the personal has never been subordinate in the

[21] Leon Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (August 1, 2006): 373–95, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241605280449; Hayano, "Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects"; Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*; Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86, http://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.3.02a00070.

[22] Hayano, "Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects," 102.

[23] Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography."

[24] Judith Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, eds. Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (London: Routledge, 1992), 10-28.

[25] Dumont, cited in Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," 15.

[26] Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*; Judith Okely, *Own or Other Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996); Anthony Cohen, "Self-Conscious Anthropology," in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, eds. Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (London: Routledge, 1992), 157-168.

private world of fieldnotes."[27] Our own inherent biases as individuals cannot be stripped from the process or production of research; as Okely states, "the specificity and individuality of the observer are ever present."[28] In the face of undeniable *subjectivity*, reflexivity becomes nothing short of an ethical necessity. The fact that "the ethnographer's personal history plays a significant role in enabling or inhibiting certain kinds of analytic insights or oversights"[29] is true of any researcher, not only a native one, effectively debunking the criticism that autoethnographers cannot conduct research on their own communities on the basis that they are subjective – as if the subjectivity of an external researcher were non-existent, as if they did not observe, inquire, relate, analyse, and communicate through the lenses of their own backgrounds and experiences.

The reflexive turn highlighted and maintains that the relationship between the ethnographer and the community they research influences the generation of knowledge, and that the implications of the research for the community must be reflected on and transmitted with "self-consciousness"[30] on the part of the researcher.[31] Researcher-members are likely to be more accountable than non-members in practicing the latter, because they, their families, and communities will need to live with these implications, and can also effectively hold the researcher to account.[32] However, this raises the issue of how critical a native autoethnographer can be of their own community.

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[27] P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, and S. Delamont, *Key Themes in Qualitative Research: Continuities and Change* (Walnut Creek, California: Alta Mira Press, 2003), 60.

[28] Okely, *Own or Other Culture*, 28.

[29] Voloder, "Autoethnographic Challenges," 34.

[30] Cohen, "Self-Conscious Anthropology."

[31] Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography"; Voloder, "Autoethnographic Challenges"; Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography.*

[32] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples,* 2nd ed. (Zed Books: London & New York, 2012); Angela P. Cheater, "Anthropologist as citizen: the

Some argue that an insider is incapable of having as critical a lens as an outsider because they cannot be objective in their analysis. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith problematizes this bias in favour of external researchers, arguing that it stems from the dominant, rational-objective frames of reference of what she refers to as the "Western"[33] academy. The attempted invalidation of both indigenous and autoethnographic research, including by fellow community members, is a product of this hegemony.

While I recognise that insiders may be prone to oversight or a degree of denial due to over-familiarity and identification with their community, I do not think it is fair to juxtapose this against an unchallenged superiority of the research that can be conducted by an outsider. Distanciation from the field is critical for researcher-members, for both personal and professional reasons, in order to gain a mental perspective, or dis-engage emotionally from the research process, something noted by the autoethnographic activist-anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh.[34] However, the immersive nature of ethnographic fieldwork alone is conducive to any researcher facing such challenges.

Furthermore, while an autoethnographer may be as capable of a critique of their own community – or more so – than an external researcher, they may not see the value of doing so for an external audience. Feminist ethnographer Elizabeth Enslin cautions "Some events… conflicts, debates, conversations, tragedies, and joys should be learned from and acted upon in the local scene rather than being

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diffracted self?," in *Anthropology at Home*, edited by Anthony Jackson (London: Tavistock, 1987), 164 - 179.

[33] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 42.

[34] Marianne Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many*: *How the Alterglobalisation Movement is Changing the Face of Democracy* (London: Pluto, 2009).

written about for… intellectual benefit or voyeuristic desires"[35]; Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out that the reporting back of indigenous research is not exclusively for academic frameworks.[36] Some of my research is relevant for the Auroville community in its own evolution and self-understanding, but not for furthering a theoretical body of knowledge. Some, while interesting to highlight as part of the theorization of experimental societies such as Auroville, may have implications for the community that outweigh this intellectual benefit.

There is also the question of what I choose to include, and not only exclude, as a "citizen anthropologist."[37] Angela Cheater highlights that

> By definition in the past, anthropologists have tended to accept their respondents' versions of local social reality. For the citizen anthropologist, however, there may be a real conflict between… supporting such local versions of reality, and his own understanding, from a different… perspective, of the future outcome for his own society by supporting such views.[38]

It is absolutely the case that I also consider potential ramifications of this research project for Auroville in terms of what it could foster within the community. Such assessment is not only subjective, but inherently political. Exposing a reflexive ethnographic process allows for the 'situating' of knowledge,[39] which I consider to be both more ethical and insightful, for this autoethnographic research project, than upholding a "pretext of objectivity."[40] Where I fall short of acknowledging my own biases and oversights – something I am especially wary of the potential for as an autoethnographer – I hope that the methodology itself will inherently afford readers the opportunity to become aware of mine.

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[35] Enslin, "Beyond Writing: Feminist Practice and the Limitations of Ethnography," 558.
[36] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.
[37] Cheater, "Anthropologist as citizen."
[38] Cheater, "Anthropologist as citizen," 170.
[39] Okely "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge."
[40] Dumont, cited in Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge," 15.

2.4 My Personal PhD Journey

I choose to share with you my personal journey as it relates to my undertaking this PhD, for two reasons. First, doing so is in keeping with the reflexive, autoethnographic mode of inquiry I have embraced for this research. Much more significantly, the process which has led to my undertaking the PhD is deeply revelatory of the spiritual experiences of Aurovilians that reflect and inform our worldview.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith affirms that native research has a mandate to ground itself in its own, so-called 'alternative' ontologies and epistemologies – ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting ourselves and the world – and thereby honour these.[41] Along the same lines, Angela Cheater states "Continuing verities such as ethnicity and witchcraft cannot be handled – as in Western textbooks – as if both teacher and student were non-believers… we are confronted here by the issue of equality: the necessity to afford the conceptual frameworks of one's fellow-citizens not merely the status of rationality (as limited and closed systems that are ultimately wrong), but also that of an equal and alternative reality that affects oneself."[42]

Among the difficult academic arguments indigenous scholars have to make, Tuhiwai Smith underscores, is that indigenous knowledge is a body of world knowledge that has a contribution to make in institutions and disciplines – in the face of the monoculturalism of Western institutions of knowledge, that prevents the inclusion or consideration of other ways of knowing and understanding.[43] I will not take on the task to make that argument here for the spiritual dimension of this

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[41] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.
[42] Cheater, "Anthropologist as Citizen," 173.
[43] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

autoethnographic research, but simply offer my experience as an affirmation of and insight into it.

I was born in Auroville in May 1987. My parents – an English father and French mother – had both dropped out of university, moved to and met in Auroville in their twenties. I was among the first students to graduate from one of the community's grassroots high schools with the qualifications that would allow me to attend university anywhere in the world, and in 2007, I joined the University of Sussex as an undergraduate student in Development Studies and Human Geography. I performed well academically, but the experience was deeply dissatisfying, and downright detrimental for my overall well-being.[44] I didn't see the point in being walled in to learn, disconnected from the world we were supposedly studying. I missed the rich, deep, intergenerational and multicultural social fabric I had experienced in Auroville, the excitement of being immersed in an unbridled learning environment, as well as the space and support for spiritual development.

After my first year, I filed for an intermission, and never returned to complete my undergraduate degree at Sussex. Five years later, I was in the Bay Area and decided to visit UC Berkeley. Despite being sorely disenchanted with my first academic experience, the question of whether or not to go back to university had kept tormenting me. I figured if it kept coming up, there was something there that was unresolved – a very Aurovilian way of looking at things. I also told myself that even if going back to university didn't turn out to be right for me, well, at least

[44] Mental health issues are so rife in the UK university context that *The Guardian* has a dedicated series on the topic, "Mental Health: A University Crisis": https://www.theguardian.com/education/series/mental-health-a-university-crisis. Within the series, see Natalie Gil, "Majority of students experience mental health issues, says NUS survey," *The Guardian*, Dec 14, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/dec/14/majority-of-students-experience-mental-health-issues-says-nus-survey.

I would never ask myself the question again in my entire life, and that alone would be worth it.

I really wasn't prepared for what I would experience that day. It was a casual visit, but it turned out to be one of those moments in my life, where all of a sudden, I felt like I'd entered into another dimension. I felt the atmosphere change from the moment I set foot on the campus, in between two immense oak trees surrounded by ginormous squirrels. (Even the fact that the squirrels were ginormous was somehow imbued with an incomprehensible magnitude of meaning – highly comical, in retrospect). The first thing I remember feeling is that I felt like I was home. As I kept walking in, I started to connect to a matrix of great minds, their activity vibrationally palpable to me. I realised that I owed it to myself to pursue a university education – and I was convinced it was meant to be at UC Berkeley. The university is notoriously difficult to get into, but I never dwelled on that. It was either meant to be, or it wasn't. I actually felt like it was already done, energetically, and over the next year like I was just going through the exercise of jumping through all the required hoops.

I got in with a full scholarship, and in my first meeting with my thesis supervisor, he broke the ice by asking me a seemingly innocent question (after struggling to pronounce my unusual name): "So, where are you from?" I responded tentatively, with a one-liner about being brought up in Auroville. Bob was fascinated. He kept asking questions, from personal ones like "How did your parents meet?" to general ones like "What form of governance do you practice?" After about forty minutes of this I started glancing apologetically through the doorway to the other students who were waiting, each of us scheduled for 10-minute slots. "Well," he concluded, "This is what you will write your thesis on." I

was flabbergasted. I could do academic research on Auroville – on my own home? "Is that a legitimate thesis topic?" I asked, to assure myself I had heard him correctly. "Of course!" he said, his eyes earnest behind big bushy eyebrows. "It's a PhD!" I was a little overwhelmed. I didn't quite take him seriously. Only once, when I was applying for an honours award for the thesis – on his recommendation – did Bob's confidence falter. "This is not a usual topic," he said. "I don't know how it will be *received*." Very well, it turned out – my thesis[45] was awarded highest honours by the department, and several professors pulled me aside advising me to take this work into a PhD. I was even shortlisted for graduating "valedictorian."[46]

But my first priority was returning to Auroville. I was tired of being away. I needed to reconnect with my spiritual home and community, and then feel into whether the PhD was what I felt called to do – another very Aurovilian practice of personal decision-making. As part of that exploration I worked on a couple of research projects, one on "Pour Tous Distribution Centre," Auroville's communal cooperative,[47] and one on education in Auroville.[48] I found these incredibly enriching, as they involved deep conversations with fellow Aurovilians, in which I asked questions I would not have occasion to otherwise, leading to insight into my peers' innermost aspirations and experiences. This put me into contact with and revealed to me the shared, underlying spiritual dimension that individuals draw from in their everyday life, and that fuels our community. I felt, more than once, a profound sense of connection with The Mother, Auroville's founder, when I sat

[45] Clarence-Smith, "Auroville: A Practical Experiment in Utopian Society" (BA thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2015).

[46] In the United States, "valedictorian" is an honorific title awarded to the top graduating student of the year, who delivers the farewell address at the graduation ceremony.

[47] Clarence-Smith, "PTDC: Auroville's Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform of Conscious Citizenship."

[48] Clarence-Smith et al, "Auroville Education Survey: 1968 – 2013," 2016.

down to my desk to write up my research, a feeling that she was guiding me to do this work – something I had never experienced before, and that so many Aurovilians spoke of.[49] I resented at some level that the obvious next step was to do a PhD on Auroville. I didn't want to leave my friends, partner, family, forest walks, community living, spiritual home *again.* I had just returned, after years of intending to. It felt unfair. And I also didn't think of a PhD as a useful endeavour at all. What would *four* additional years of academic pursuit concretely offer the world? But there was an undeniable feeling that I was being called to, and, inexplicably, that I was being directed to by The Mother. I decided to surrender to that, albeit uncomfortably.

Fig. 5. The Mother.[50]

Surrendering to the Divine Consciousness – in this case, personified as The Mother – is a key practice of Integral Yoga. It has none of the connotations of

[49] Matthias Pommerening, "Soul of Sustainability? Inner dimensions of work for a sustainable society. An Auroville case study," (MSc thesis, Medical School Berlin, 2017); Larry Seidlitz *Integral Yoga at Work* (Pondicherry: Indian Psychology Institute, 2016).

[50] *metamórphosis*, accessed Oct 15, 2019, https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-z7iR_k5piRE/WSdXvntkAFI/AAAAAAAABpg/unS1l187CFkateSg0TJh-TDpiQZi41BYACPcBGAYYCw/s1600/Bildschirmfoto%2Bvom%2B2017-05-20%2B11-37-37.png.

passivity that we would associate with the word 'surrender' in a 'Western' understanding, being exercised within a spiritual discipline of action, or work, "Karma Yoga." Karma Yoga is one of the three paths of yoga, according to Vedic scripture. It is elucidated in The Bhagavad Gita, a foundational text for Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and practice, on which he commented extensively.[51] Essentially, the path of Karma Yoga involves carrying out the work we are being asked to do by the Divine, even if there is something else we could do better, or feel better about, as an act of service and in a spirit of offering to the Divine, and without being attached to the fruits of our action.

In our contemporary, predominantly results-driven 'Westernized' global culture, in which education – higher in particular – is primarily approached instrumentally, guiding one's life choices in this way is difficult for most to comprehend. When people ask me why I'm doing this PhD, and I tell them it's because I feel I am 'meant' to, it leaves the vast majority perplexed. As though I hadn't understood the question, some try to reframe it: "It's so much work, what are you hoping to get out of it? Become a professor…?" I smile, knowing it's hard to really explain to someone who has no reference points for it. But I try again, reframing the answer: "I'm not doing it for what comes after. I might do something completely different, after. I'm doing it now because I feel it's what I'm meant to do."

[51] Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2015).

2.5 The Autoethnographic Challenge to Self-Understanding

Autoethnography is reputed to be a uniquely demanding and trying methodology, prone to difficult self-questioning.[52] Research on one's own community may challenge foundational self-understandings – of both self and community – and reframe the nature of the researcher's relationship with their community. The practice of being reflexive throughout the course of one's research can also be a strenuous process, psychologically and emotionally. I was in some ways primed for this because both introspection and a questioning of established social practices forms part of the Aurovilian culture. Self-awareness and self-exploration is embedded in the process of Integral Yoga, and the tools and inclination for doing so were nurtured in our Auroville education and upbringing. Along with the culture of adopting a broad view of situations, based on the understanding that an evolutionary process of consciousness is one that is uneven, sometimes seemingly contradictory, conflictual, and challenging at both individual and collective levels, this created a basis from which I was able to maintain, or at least return to, a centred, non-reactive, and peaceful state. This helped me to weather the fieldwork process, and to access a subjective objectivity.

The biggest challenge I could have faced, at a personal level, from undertaking research on Auroville, was being confronted with realities within our community that violated my understanding of it, and were previously unknown to me. Thankfully, I had already largely undergone the brunt of this process, having returned to the community prior – at 28, after having lived abroad for almost a decade. While I had visited the community several times during this period, I had never become engaged in it as an adult: I was not working within the community in

[52] Carolyn Ellis, "Heartful Autoethnography," *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 5 (September 1999): 669–83, http://doi.org/10.1177/104973299129122153.

any kind of capacity. Thus I had been, to a large extent, blissfully unaware of the challenges inherent in creating and maintaining the social world I benefitted from immersing and imbuing myself within during my stays, just like during my childhood.

Every visit to Auroville during the period in which I lived outside of it was an experience of deep spiritual, energetic, physical and emotional recharge, given the pervasive spiritual atmosphere and nurturing web of relationships – family, friends, teachers, and other unknown community members with whom one feels a connection simply through their openness and presence. However, as soon as I became involved in community projects, and an initial work of research,[53] I was confronted with attitudes and practices that challenged my expectations of ours being a community of conscious individuals with a shared ideal of human unity. This was no easy process, and one that is shared by other returnees and those newly joining the community. It is probably inevitable for the unseasoned idealist, and a trapping of any project with utopian aspirations.

I had thus already undergone a process of being destabilised in my self-understanding of our community, before undertaking the PhD, and I had also been able to ground myself into a deeper, more mature and more centred understanding of it. As a result, I was experientially, and not just intellectually, prepared for such challenges to arise in the course of my doctoral fieldwork, which they did. There was one particular group whose meetings I attended, in which I found myself shocked by the gap between my understanding of the ideals of the community as pertained to their field of work, and the attitudes, values, and contents of their discussions. I found it very challenging to attend these meetings; I was too

[53] Clarence-Smith, "PTDC: Auroville's Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform of Conscious Citizenship."

identified with my expectations of what such conversations should be centred on and entail, and with what tone, to bear witness to them with detachment and not be unhealthily affected (on the other hand, there was another group by which I was unexpectedly positively surprised; having had misplaced preconceptions).

2.6 Personal Empowerment or Ethnography at Home

Another level of challenge of autoethnography is that the collapsing of home and field makes for all-consuming fieldwork. In my case, my personal life was largely overtaken by the research process, and transformed by it. Like my fellow autoethnographer Lejla Voloder,

> I found that not only did my circle of family, friends and relatives encroach into research territory but that maintaining artificial boundaries between my everyday life and research was proving counterproductive and a betrayal of the highly entangled web of relationships of which I was a part… I was a fully engaged member of the social world under study and with this came the recognition that my research could be enriched by this closeness.[54]

Furthermore, ethnographic participant-observation propelled an intensification of my participation in community life, which included engaging in spheres and practices that I never had previously, from governance to singing with the Auroville Choir.

While challenging in its intensity – I thought of myself as living 'one and a half lives' during fieldwork – the collapsing of home and field was enriching for me in countless, significant ways, research outcomes aside. It sparked deeply insightful and revelatory conversations with friends, family, and acquaintances that may never have been broached otherwise. The process of research uncovered histories of my parents' engagement within the community that I was utterly unaware of; a question I asked them at a Sunday family lunch on common accounts

[54] Voloder, "Autoethnographic Challenges," 33.

in Auroville led me to discover that they had started the first common account.[55] I embarked on research on Auroville's 'service economy' only to discover that my mother had been one of its chief architects. As she was a member of several key economic Working Groups that I was sitting in on during the course of my fieldwork, I came to spend many a meeting in her company, in a capacity in which she was previously entirely unknown to me. As a result, we have collaborated on proposals for economic policy, effecting a translation of my work into action research.

Generally speaking, I would say that the knowledge I gained about Auroville, relationships I built, and insights gleaned as a result of the research process significantly empowered me as a community member. Those ethnographers who advocate for reflexivity maintain that is imperative to do so because it serves to 'situate' knowledge, and that this serves a fundamentally ethical function.[56] I found that my autoethnographic endeavour allowed me to situate *myself*, in a reflexive and evolving process, in relationship to my community. Because I have developed my capacity to situate my personal experiences in light of a bigger picture I am much better able to position myself within Auroville in an intentional and ethical way, in light of its ideals.

Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes speaks of how a native anthropologist has to become a 'multiple native,' transcending her own pre-existing personal relationship with the community in order to relate with a broader spectrum of community members. This can be challenging, especially in a small community setting like Auroville, where simply engaging with certain groups or individuals is likely to be read as alliance, and the implications this may have for one's on-going

[55] See Chapter 8 of this thesis.
[56] Okely, "Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge."

personal, social and professional relationships – which are more often than not intertwined. Stella says she wished for "an outward sign, such as a large badge, saying 'I am an anthropologist' and therefore should be granted 'diplomatic immunity'."[57]

For me, being compelled to become a 'multiple native' was primarily an interesting experience in overcoming what were often unconsciously inherited perceptions about others within the community, and even led to the formation of new relationships. Chang has highlighted that among the singular benefits of the autoethnographic mode are increasing sensitivity towards the experiences, positionality, and needs of others, potentially even correcting misunderstandings and misperceptions that might be blocking effective responsiveness to communal and interpersonal challenges.[58] This was, to a certain extent, an outcome of a prior autoethnographic research project on Auroville,[59] and I humbly aspire that this doctoral research will yield such benefits as well, and with greater scope.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith contrasts Western academia, dominated by critique, with contemporary indigenous research, whose key mode is community-based action projects and initiatives.[60] While I am a white European, and not an indigenous person, as a researcher-member of Auroville much of my field research almost perforce became action research, due to my investment in the community as a member, and the trust and familiarity that other community members –

[57] Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes, "The native anthropologist: constraints and strategies in research," in *Anthropology at Home*, edited by Anthony Jackson (London: Tavistock, 1987), 181-182.

[58] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, 54.

[59] Clarence-Smith, "PTDC: Auroville's Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform of Conscious Citizenship."

[60] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 30.

including ones that did not know me personally – bestowed on me as a result, which led them to invite me to merge my research with their activism as a result.

The awarding of trust and familiarity is a phenomenon that Lejla Voloder, another young autoethnographer, also experienced in her fieldwork, and which she specifically attributed to her being a young, second-generation member of the community.[61] My identity as an 'Auroville kid' – one ascribed to anyone born or raised in Auroville, whatever their current age might be – and its associated embeddedness in the communal web of relationships, resulted not only in this inherited trust and familiarity, but also, in an enthusiasm from an older generation of community members to involve me in processes, particularly of governance, as an investment in the future of Auroville – something compounded by a perceived lack of interest from young Aurovilians in the political realm of community life.

Thus, my participant-observation in the Selection Process of Auroville's major Working Groups led the Auroville Council[62] to invite me to join them as a resource person for its review and amendment. My participant-observation in Auroville's economic governance groups led to my consulting on initiatives presented to the community as part of the Funds and Assets Management Committee's "Growing Auroville's Economy Sustainably" call for new economic proposals for the community, in November 2018. Most important, however, in terms of a community-based action project emerging from my research, was "The Bridge," a conference project I led for Auroville's 50th anniversary, which involved taking a new level of responsibility and engagement within the community.

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[61] Voloder, "Autoethnographic Challenges."

[62] A Working Group whose mandate is to address issues and concerns internal to the community: between community members, with community bodies, and related to community processes and policies.

Had I not been engaged in research on and in Auroville, I would not have envisioned such an event. It was precisely because my study of Auroville highlighted its underserved potential as a site of research that I came to do so, inspired by our community's Charter, which states that "Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity." An academic research project thus empowered my participation in an active initiative in the community that sought to put its ideals into practice – the very phenomenon that my doctoral research seeks to investigate. Even more significant, however, may be the fact that undertaking this doctoral research itself was a significant experience of 'coming of age' as an Aurovilian, given that it was revelatory of the practice of "Karma Yoga" in the Auroville context, as described earlier in this chapter.

The autoethnographic research process has offered me unique opportunities to engage in, relate to, embody and understand Auroville, as a community and a project, from within. Before delving into my theoretical conceptualisation and ethnographic exploration of Auroville, informed by the latter, in the next chapter I consider it 'from without,' in the broader historical context and literature of intentional communities.

3 Contextualising Auroville: The Intentional Community Phenomenon

"At a certain stage it might be necessary to follow the age-long device of the separate community… in which the consciousness of the individual might concentrate on its evolution in surroundings where all was turned and centered towards the one endeavor and, next to formulate and develop the new life … in this prepared spiritual atmosphere."[1] Sri Aurobindo.

Establishing intentional communities in which to pioneer alternative ways of living than in dominant cultures and societies is, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, nothing new. They have been a recurring phenomenon throughout human history; the earliest record is found in St Paul's letters, dated 5th century AD. The first known piece of social science research on these is an 1844 study on communalism in America by Mary Hennell, titled *An Outline of the Various Social Systems and Communities which have been founded on the Principle of Co-Operation*.[2] In this chapter, I situate Auroville in light of the rich history of intentional communities, and my research within the study of these. I also consider Auroville's roots in the Indian ashram tradition, and how it is distinct from an ashram and other guru-centric organisations and communities.

Lyman Tower Sargent defines "intentional community," an umbrella term that encompasses the vast array of historical and contemporary communal experiments,[3] as

> A group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose.[4]

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[1] Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 22, *The Life Divine – II* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram), 1061-1062.

[2] Mary Hennel, *An Outline of the Various Social Systems & Communities Which Have Been Founded on the Principle of Co-Operation* (London, 1844).

[3] Alternate terms used are communes, utopian communities, communal utopias, cooperative communities, ecovillages, etc.

[4] Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

Such communities have come into existence for many different reasons, and taken various forms throughout history. They have been religious, spiritual, and secular in nature. They include groups that are strongly bounded, such as monastic orders, and others that are open, such as educational communities. Some aspire to be institutionally complete, developing their own educational, economic, and governmental institutions; others, such as co-housing cooperatives, arise to fulfil a specific socio-economic need. Although the majority are established in rural areas, they exist in urban settings too: co-housing co-operatives are a common feature of major cities such as London and San Francisco; Christiana, a commune situated within the city of Copenhagen, is among the largest in the world. They include anarchist communes, and ones planned by governments. While intentional communities by and large have been critiqued as escapist, insular, indoctrinating, and incapable of perpetuating themselves, they have also attracted recognition for their radical attempts to reinvent society, and for pioneering progressive practices that were later adopted into mainstream society.[5]

In the following sections, I will trace the historical development of these communities, highlighting features that offer the most relevant points of comparison with Auroville. These include communities inspired by utopian ideals and by Indian spirituality, the involvement of governments in establishing or supporting various communes, and Auroville's contemporaries.

[5] Bouvard, *The Intentional Community Movement: Building a New Moral World* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1975)*;* Robert Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia: Establishing Intentional Communities as a New Social Movement* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey, 1997)*.*

3.1 Intentional Communities: A Historical Introduction

3.1.1 Spiritual, Religious, and Secular Roots of Intentional Communities

The earliest known forms of intentional communities are religious and spiritual in nature. Buddhism and Christianity both have an extant monastic tradition dating back at least 2000 years. Sanskrit, perhaps the world's most ancient (Indian) language, has a specific word for spiritual communities, 'sangha,' and India has a living legacy of 'ashrams,' spiritual residential communes, which today exist throughout the world. The first recorded account of a communitarian 'movement' seeking benefits other than religious or spiritual seclusion is found in St Paul's 5th century letters, describing a wave of communitarianism among Christians who sought political and cultural freedoms within the enclave of community living. The first record of secular communes dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries, where rapidly destabilising social relations in Europe, due to newly emerging wealth, is said to have fomented their creation.[6] The following quotation is a description of this phenomenon; the scene it conveys striking me as similar to that of the 1960s, the period in which Auroville was founded:

> the mountain paths and town ghettos all over Europe were overrun from time to time by wandering fanatics, militants, flower people, most of whom preached brotherhood and poverty[7]

The 1960s were also a period of social upheaval, and contemporary scholars of intentional community have noted that

> Communitarianism as community building… tends to cluster numerically in times of extreme stress caused by cultural confusion, usually generated by radical changes in the social and cultural environment.[8]

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[6] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.

[7] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*, 26.

[8] Susan Love Brown, ed., *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002), 5. One should add that changes in the *natural* environment have been key to the more recent wave of eco-villages.

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The fact that these early communitarians sought out freedoms that were not only religious, but also related to aspects of public life and social life, is significant for it demonstrates that communitarianism as a device for the pursuit of alternative, and at least by internal understandings 'progressive', lifestyles has historical antecedents distinct from religious and monastic forms. Given the spiritually-inspired socially reformist nature of the Auroville project, it is also important to note that social change was sought among and enacted by religious peoples in creating these separate communities, a trend which we will see continues throughout the history of intentional communities.

3.1.2 The 'first wave' of utopian societies

What are considered the first 'utopian' communities are the "first wave" intentional communities established in the 19th century as the result of a synthesis between practical communitarians and utopian writers, in which a variety of religious, and secular but not a-spiritual communities were established, primarily in the United States, and other British colonial territories such as New Zealand. These were based on the prescriptions of European utopian social theorists of the time, such as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier and Henri Saint-Simon, used contemporary literary utopias such as Etienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* as blueprints, and were inspired by the Transcendentalist authors and poets Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.[9]

[9] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.

Fig. 6. New Harmony, as envisaged by Robert Owen.[10]

While these communities were the product of an intellectual élite, and attracted a significant number of educated, cultivated and well-respected individuals – politicians, scientists, academics, social reformers and educators such as the early feminist Frances Wright, and Richard Owen, Indiana state geologist and university president – their practice was often derided and threatened, both by law and local communities who considered them to be deviant. Under various combinations of external and internal pressures, most disbanded, disintegrated, or changed form, and were thus considered to be failures – and continue to be in popular opinion. How we evaluate the success and failure of intentional communities was significantly problematized however, in Rosabeth Kanter's 1972 sociological study *Commitment and Community*. She proposes a number of measures of success of for such communal experiments, such as whether the

[10] F. Bate, "New Harmony, a utopian attempt, depicted as proposed by Robert Owen," 1838, *Wikipedia* accessed Oct 14, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Harmony,_Indiana#/media/File:New_Harmony,_Indiana,_por_F._Bates.jpg.

community satisfied its members during the time it was active, that are of continued relevance in assessing these today.

Among the most famous of these utopian communities are New Harmony, a social reformist community, and Oneida, a religious perfectionist commune, both in the United States. New Harmony was founded by the British industrialist Robert Owen in Indiana in 1825 as an experiment in social reform, but exhausted his funds within two years, members failing to engage in the economic development of the community. While the project of the utopian commune was dissolved, the assets of the township split among Owen's children, several of the scientists and educators remained, notably establishing a laboratory that would become the headquarters of the US Geological Survey. Oneida was founded in the state of New York by a charismatic leader, John Humphrey Noyes, in 1848; its members famously practiced communal childrearing and 'free love' or 'complex marriage', as well as 'mutual criticism,' a collective effort to strip one another of imperfect character traits. While the intentional community dissolved in 1881 due to challenges with leadership succession, as well as moral and legal persecution from the local inhabitants, notably clergymen, its members re-organised as a joint stock company sill in operation today, "Oneida Limited".[11]

It is important to note that the wave of North American 19th-century utopian communities did have an antecedent in the religious communities established in the 17th and 18th centuries, by separatist British and central European Protestant groups such as the Amish, Quakers, Monrovians, Puritans,

[11] Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

and Shakers.[12] Rejecting the Church as corrupt, these groups had begun formulating alternative ways of living inspired by their own interpretations of Protestant faith. Facing persecution for this in their home countries, several opted to relocate to the 'New World' where they were able to establish settlements and pursue their experimental reform endeavour, which extended to many aspects of society, such as gender roles, in a freer and fuller fashion.[13] Notably, the utopian community New Harmony was founded in a town established by and purchased from a separatist Lutheran group.

The reader will have noted that the religious and utopian intentional communities highlighted in this section all emerge from the European religious and utopian tradition, and are primarily enacted in colonised North America. The literature on such communal experiments[14] is so-focussed, particularly for the time period examined, given their significant collective proliferation; that said, its authors are primarily American scholars. It is also imperative to acknowledge that non-European utopian philosophy, social theory, and practice is missing from the utopian studies canon, and that an emphasis on European and American enactments of intentional community remains predominant in contemporary scholarship. That said, the following section highlights the Israeli kibbutz movement, which has its own dedicated body of literature,[15] and a later section on the more recent Indian articulations of intentional community.

[12] For a history of intentional communities established in England, see Walter H. G. Armytage, *Heavens Below: Utopian Experiments in England, 1560 – 1960* (London: Routledge, 1961).

[13] See Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias*.

[14] See section 3.3 of this chapter, dedicated to this scholarship.

[15] See the upcoming "Intentional Community Scholarship" section of this chapter.

3.1.3 Government-Incentivised Intentional Communities

In the early British colonial period – as early as the 1600s – many British subjects were encouraged and incentivised by their government to form settler colonies, primarily in the Northeastern portion of the United States, a region still referred to as 'New England'. Utopian imaginaries were intentionally used to encourage people to migrate, however, their motivations were escapist rather than reformist – with the notable exception of the religious groups highlighted in the previous section. The British government encouraged settler communities in New Zealand in the later colonial period, and these were, by contrast, actively influenced by the concurrent discourse of utopian socialism.[16] Interestingly, both New Zealand and the United States have a rich subsequent history and present-day practice of intentional communities, following the initial establishment of settler communities.

Despite the contentious utopian socialist communitarian experiments of the 19th century, the 20th century followed with the establishment of communities designed by governments, through which they sought to solve social and economic problems. In the United States, this occurred in the context of the 1930s depression, where close to 100 communities were constructed as a form of relief and resettlement.[17] In New Zealand, the government-designed "Ohu" programme attempted to alleviate issues of unemployment and disaffection, particularly among youth, through planned communities as well.[18] The kibbutz movement, another very important communitarian movement of the 20th century, came to be supported by the Israeli government as a model of national development.

[16] Sargent, *Utopianism.*
[17] Sargent, *Utopianism*.
[18] Lucy Sargisson and Lyman Tower Sargent, *Living in Utopia : New Zealand's Intentional Communities* (Aldershot ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

Interestingly, this finds echoes in the anti-colonial national development Gandhi sought to foster in India, a socio-economic and political organisation based on networks of village communities. Several communities of the late 20th century, Auroville among them, have also garnered governmental and United Nations support in the form of financing, partnerships, and recognition for their innovative potential and practices. I will expand on this in the upcoming section on these "second wave" intentional communities.

3.1.4 The second wave: "hippie communes"

The colloquially termed 'hippie communes' of the 1960s and 1970s are referred to as the second wave of intentional communities.[19] These were formed primarily in the United States, as well as in New Zealand, Australia, and across Europe, inspired by the celebration of emancipatory social relations in the wake of the civil rights and feminist movements, conscious protest as part of the anti-war movement, as well as the growing awareness of environmentalism.[20] The spirit and culture of the revolutionary era of '68 was in part informed by the concurrent discovery of Indian spirituality, popularised by contemporary artists such as The Beatles, which offered tools for the individual emancipation that was seen as necessary to accompany and realise the transformation sought for society at large. Many communes incorporated elements of Indian spiritual philosophy and practices into their alternative lifestyles, and these drew young, international seekers to India, some of whom joined the Auroville community, founded in 1968.

[19] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.
[20] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*; Bouvard, *The Intentional Community Movement.*

The number of intentional communities established in the United States in this period is greater than the sum of all previous others.[21] However the three most successful intentional communities – in terms of size, longevity, and recognition – founded during this period and still active today, Auroville among them, were not established in America. Findhorn is an international, ecological, educational community founded in Scotland by a charismatic female mystic in 1962 focused sustainable living, made up of approximately 400 members from 40 different countries. [22] It has been awarded the UN Habitat Best Practice designation, and regularly hosts sustainability seminars in affiliation with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research.

Fig. 7. Findhorn Foundation Community Centre.[23]

Fig. 8. Findhorn Foundation Universal Hall.[24]

The spiritual and artistic community of Damanhur founded in 1972 in Italy has a current population of approximately 600, primarily comprised of Italians; it too has received a UN Global Human Settlements award for sustainable

[21] Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma: A study of Contemporary American Communes* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

[22] "About the Findhorn Foundation," Findhorn Foundation, accessed Feb 17, 2017, https://www.findhorn.org/about-us/.

[23] Chris Cantrelle, "Findhorn Foundation," Pinterest accessed Oct 15, 2019, https://www.pinterest.com/pin/23362491791606160/?nic=1.

[24] "Findhorn Foundation," *Ecovillage Findhorn*, accessed Oct 16, 2019, https://www.ecovillagefindhorn.com/index.php/water/46-findhorn-ecovillage/137-findhorn-foundation."

communities.[25] Auroville, significantly larger with a population of 3000, has been recognised by UNESCO in five of its resolutions for its contributions to the advancement of innovative and sustainable, peaceful and harmonious social, cultural and educational development.[26] It is also recognised and funded by the Indian government, as a registered foundation under its Human Resources Ministry.

All three of these communities are exceptional in the breadth of their activities; each experiment with alternative forms of governance, economic and ecological practices, have their own educational institutions and health centres. Auroville appears to be the most developed in terms of an autonomous alternative society, perhaps by virtue of its size. Creating institutionally complete communities, however, was not a determining feature of 1960s and 1970s communes – as such the project of Auroville is akin to that of the first wave of utopian communities, albeit practiced in the feminist, anarchist, and egalitarian spirit of the second wave of the 1960s.

3.1.5 "Eco & Co": The third wave?

According to the online *Communities* directory,[27] there are thousands of intentional communities in existence throughout the world today – beyond Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, on which contemporary intentional community scholarship remains focussed nonetheless –, encompassing such a wide variety of aims and arrangements that contemporary scholars warn

[25] "What is Damanhur," Damanhur, accessed Feb 17, 2017, http://www.damanhur.org./en/what-is-damanhur.

[26] In 1966, 1968, 1970, 2007 and 2017. See "Statements of Support – UNESCO," last updated March 2, 2018, https://www.auroville.org/contents/538, for details of all five UNESCO resolutions on Auroville.

[27] "Community Directory," Fellowship for Intentional Community, accessed Feb 17, 2017, https://www.ic.org/directory/listings/.

against generalisation and even comparison.[28] They may be housing co-operatives, feminist, or seek to live a low ecological footprint life, but few aspire to form the alternative societies envisioned and attempted during the first and even second wave of the movement, in which at least the basic needs of members (housing, employment, education, health, etc.) could be met.

"Eco-villages" have emerged as a particularly strong contingent of this amorphous third wave (?) of intentional communities – a broad contingent of communes that experiment with various dimensions of sustainability, ecological being a key focus. The term came into use in 1995 with the founding of the Global Ecovillage Network, an organisation that promotes the interconnection and visibility of these communities and their sustainable practices in an effort to catalyse a global shift in lifestyles.[29] Interestingly in light of the caution against generalisation is the contention in Auroville around the community having been affiliated with GEN by some of its members, while others do not recognise it within the category, due primarily to its focus on spirituality as the catalyst of change.

3.2 From Ashram to Utopian Society: Indian Articulations of Intentional Community

Auroville readily lends itself to being understood as part of the intentional community movement and examined in light of scholarship on the subject. It shares many characteristics with contemporary second-wave intentional communities, and is the only secular, albeit spiritual, intentional community to have emerged in India.[30] Given its close association with Sri Aurobindo, one of India's most famous spiritual figures, and his collaborator, The Mother, who

[28] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia.*
[29] Global Ecovillage Network, accessed April 26, 2019, https://ecovillage.org.
[30] Minor, *The Religious, the Spiritual, and the Secular: Auroville and Secular India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

founded the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the late 1920s and Auroville in the late 1960s, it is important to note Auroville's roots in the Indian ashram tradition.

India has a long history of ashrams, centres where devotees of a certain spiritual figure or 'guru' gather, and often reside alongside him or her. Traditionally ashrams were places where 'sadhaks,' or spiritual practitioners, renounced and retreated from worldly lives in order to pursue contemplative and devotional practices, such as meditation, study and chanting, under the guidance of the guru, as well as 'darshan' – public or private sessions, literally 'viewings'.

In the 19th century, the phenomenon of "guru organisations"[31] – in which some gurus and their ashrams take on missionary activities related to both spiritual education and humanitarianism, and establish centres internationally – began to emerge. In doing so some sought to reform society, such as Swami Vivekananda, perhaps the forefather of this practice.[32] The most famous current example of such a 'guru organisation' is that of 'Amma,' Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, a female guru from Kerala who has founded numerous charitable organisations and ashrams internationally, and engages in worldwide travel.[33]

The Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry is a different type of spiritual community and endeavour; neither a centre of renunciation nor a missionary

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[31] Maya Warrier, "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission," *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2003): 213-253, http://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X03001070; Maya Warrier, "Guru Choice and Spiritual Seeking in Contemporary India," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1–3 (February 2003): 31-54, http://doi.org/10.1007/s11407-003-0002-7.

[32] Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Math in 1866 – a monastic order in which monks live communally, and focus on spiritual practices and on the dissemination of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda's teachings, through which a concurrent reform of Hinduism and Indian society was sought based on the revival and spread of Vedic wisdom – and the Ramakrishna Mission, a humanitarian voluntary organisation in which monks and devotees engage in charitable work. Vivekananda travelled and educated audiences in India and abroad, establishing a network of Vedanta societies, and today the Ramakrishna Movement counts close to two hundred centres worldwide.

[33] Warrier, "Processes of Secularization in Contemporary India"; Warrier, "Guru Choice and Spiritual Seeking in Contemporary India."

organisation, the ashram was "created with another object than that ordinarily common to such institutions, not for the renunciation of the world but as a centre and a field of practice for the evolution of another kind and form of life."[34] There are no set rites or practices for the ashramites to follow, instead they engage in numerous secular activities of 'ordinary' life, seeking to make them a part of their yoga, or spiritual practice. One of Sri Aurobindo's iconic phrases is "all life is yoga"[35]; all aspects of life were to be imbued with a higher consciousness in "an effort to create a new life-formation which will exceed the ordinary human society."[36]

Fig. 9. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.[37]

[34] Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 35, *Letters on Himself and the Ashram: Selected Letters on His Outer and Inner Life, His Path of Yoga and the Practice of Yoga in His Ashram* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2011), 847.

[35] Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga - I*, 8.

[36] Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine - II*, 1060.

[37] "Sri Aurobindo Ashram," *The Residency*, accessed Oct 15, 2019, https://www.theresidency.com/blogs/detail/5/hotel/3/top-places-to-visit-in-pondicherry.

Both anthropological and insider accounts of ashram life are generally lacking. The Sri Aurobindo ashram stands out in this regard, with two books written by disciples, whose object is the life of the ashram itself.[38] Mukherjee's *Sri Aurobindo Ashram: Its Role, Responsibility and Future Destiny*, is a uniquely valuable piece in that it offers an insider's assessment of the challenges and issues faced in the ashram, something often glossed over in the prevalent hagiographies of gurus, personal accounts of disciples where they exist,[39] or the bitter criticisms of ex-members.[40]

Sri Aurobindo referred to the ashram as "a first form which our effort has taken, a field in which the preparatory work has to be done."[41] This sheds some background insight as to how and why The Mother came to found Auroville in 1968, as a second 'form' through which to realise Sri Aurobindo's vision of a life divine: an experimental township. While she acted as a managing guru of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville was to be a community developed by its own members, with no predetermined organisational structures and rules.[42]

The only Indian guru to have explicitly attempted to form a utopian community out of his ashram is Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, later known as Osho.[43]

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[38] Narayan Prasad, *Life in Sri Aurobindo Ashram.* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1965); Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo Ashram: Its Role, Responsibility, and Future Destiny: An Insider's Personal View* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1997). See also the article by Peter Heehs, "Sri Aurobindo and His Ashram, 1910-2010: An Unfinished History," *Nova Religio* 19, no. 1 (2015): 65-86.

[39] Such as Arthur Osborne' accounts of ashram life at the Sri Ramana Maharshi ashram in Tiruvannamalai, India. See Arthur Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the path of self-knowledge* (London: Rider, 1954).

[40] A notable example is Sarah Caldwell, "The Heart of the Secret: A Personal and Scholarly Encounter with Shakta Tantrism in Siddha Yoga," *Nova Religio* 5, no. 1 (October 2001): 9-51, http://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2001.5.1.9.

[41] Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine – II*, 13.

[42] Although in early years, The Mother stated that there should be no use of drugs or alcohol in Auroville. See *The Mother on Auroville* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1977).

[43] Although another utopian communal experiment, Anandanagar, was undertaken by the Ananda Marga sect in Bengal. See Raphael Voix, "Une utopie en pays Bengali: De l'idéologie sectaire hindoue à l'édification d'une alternative communautaire," in *Idées religieuses, engagement et projets*

Born in 1931, he first created an ashram in Pune in 1974. In 1981, Rajneesh and about 2000 of his followers formed an international, intentional community in Oregon, projected to become a society of 50,000, and obtained the legal status of a city.[44] Rajneeshpuram only lasted four years, after which Rajneesh relocated to the old ashram in Pune, which he renamed the Osho Commune International,[45] today a spiritual resort.[46]

Academic work on Rajneeshpuram and the ashram in Pune emphasise the hierarchical and coercive nature of the community; and the "overpowering social control" [47] effectuated by the community leaders Rajneesh had appointed. Faith in the charismatic Rajneesh, and the desire to remain near him, overshadowed doubts regarding contentious community policies, members remaining silent for fear of being expelled.[48] Not being dependent on a guru for its day-to-day organisation, management and development, Auroville has avoided such pitfalls of charismatic leadership, prevalent in both guru-centric ashrams and intentional communities worldwide.

Although Auroville was founded by The Mother, a guru at the head of an Indian Ashram, and many Aurovilians refer to records of her intentions and recommendations for the township's development, it is clearly a distinct form of spiritual community to existing Indian ashrams. Aside from their shared basis of

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de société en Asie du Sud moderne et contemporaine, ed. C. Clémentin-Ojha (Paris: EFEO, 2011), 165–188.

[44] Hugh B. Urban, "Zorba The Buddha: Capitalism, Charisma and the Cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh," *Religion* 26, no. 2 (April 1996): 161-182, http://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1996.0013.

[45] Marion Goldman, "Averting Apocalypse at Rajneeshpuram," *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 3 (September 2009): 311-327. http://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srp036.

[46] Anthony D'Andrea, "Osho International Meditation Resort (Pune, 2000s): An Anthropological Analysis of Sannyasin Therapies and The Rajneesh Legacy," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 47, no. 1 (January 2007): 91-116, http://doi.org/10.1177/0022167806292997.

[47] Carl Latkin, "From Device to Vice: Social Control and Intergroup Conflict at Rajneeshpuram," *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 4 (1991): 368, http://doi.org/10.2307/3710852.

[48] Latkin, "From Device to Vice."

Integral Yoga, the kinship between the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville is perhaps most obvious in the socio-economic organisation of the township, something that will be addressed in Chapter 7, as well as their common pedagogical practice of Integral Education. While Auroville historically was affiliated with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, located in the neighbouring city of Pondicherry, the community is currently registered as a secular Foundation under the Human Resources Development Ministry of India's Central Government and has no ties with the Ashram; these developments are examined in Chapter 5.

While I thus recognise Auroville's roots in the ashram tradition, in my thesis I treat such data as contextual in my theoretical framing of Auroville as a spiritual and utopian intentional community. In the next section, I review existing intentional community scholarship, and place my research within it. In the following chapter, I will consider the spiritual and utopian dimensions of this project.

3.3 Intentional Community Scholarship

Why research intentional communities? I am inspired to because of the compelling personal experience of being involved in one since my birth, and comparative experiences of living in four other countries, as a child, teenager, and adult. I am fascinated by the alternative values, ways of being, and organising that were fostered in Auroville, and the commitment of its members in perpetuating this societal experiment, which I have personally found to be immensely enriching, despite and in the midst of its challenges. I think there is something we can learn from these laboratories of social change, even though I am not sure of how applicable it will be for mainstream societies. Many other scholars – sociologists,

anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, historians, religious and utopian scholars have been drawn to exploring these experimental societies as well.

Intentional community scholarship as a field of inquiry burgeoned with the emergence of the 'second wave' 1960s communes.[49] A substantial amount of this interdisciplinary body of work is focused on American religious communities of the 17th and 18th centuries and 'first wave' utopian communities of the 19th century,[50] and includes comparative work between these 'first wave' communities and those of the 'second wave' by scholars writing in the midst of the latter, in the early 1970s.[51] Another focus of research has been the Israeli Kibbutz community movement, established by various groups throughout the 20th century, which has also attracted a dedicated body of scholarship,[52] some of it framing kibbutzim as utopian practice.[53] Exceptions to these historical and geographical emphases is contemporary ethnographic research in intentional communities in Australia,[54] New Zealand,[55] and the United Kingdom,[56] as well as works which examine the global proliferation of intentional communities.[57] The most established of existing communities – Auroville, Findhorn, and Damanhur – each have been the subject of

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[49] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*.

[50] Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias*; Brown, *Intentional Community*.

[51] Bouvard, *The Intentional Community Movement*; Rosabeth Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972); Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.

[52] Eliezer Ben-Rafael, *Crisis and Transformation: The Kibbutz at Century's End* (New York: State of New York University Press, 1997); Michael Palgi and Shulamit Reinharz, eds., *One Hundred Years of Kibbutz Life: A Century of Crises and Reinvention* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

[53] Uriel Leviatan, "Kibbutzim as a Real-life Utopia: Survival Depends on Adherence to Utopian Values," *Psychology & Developing Societies* 25, no. 2 (2013): 249-81, http://doi.org/10.1177/0971333613500873.

[54] William James Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality: Cooperative Lifestyles in Australia* (Kensington: University of NSW Press, 1995).

[55] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia.*

[56] Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*.

[57] Yaacov Oved, *Globalization of Communes: 1950-2010* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2013); William James Metcalf, *Shared Visions, Shared Lives: Communal Living around the Globe* (Forres: Findhorn Press, 1996).

academic work. Of these, Auroville has attracted the most research, in a variety of fields from environmental to religious.[58]

The historical scholarship of intentional communities – which constitutes the most significant of the body of work on these – is an impressive showcase of archival research, reconstituting and describing their social structures, norms, practices, and framing beliefs, values, and ideals.[59] While we do get some sense of the dominant societies these groups sought to separate themselves from and their reasons for doing so, the contemporary influences that informed their lifestyles, and the internal and external pressures that challenged their capacity to perpetuate themselves, the focus of the research remains insular; this is true even of scholars who view communitarianism as phases of social movements and critiques.[60] As such, it is informative for scholars of intentional communities, but lacking in its bearing and contribution to understanding the process and potential of societal change inspired by utopian aspirations.[61]

This I contend is because in scholarship of intentional communities in general, while the alternative practices they engage in are often well

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[58] On Findhorn, see Iris Kunze, "Social Innovations for Communal and Ecological Living: Lessons from Sustainability Research and Observations in Intentional Communities," *Communal Societies* 32, no. 1 (2012): 50-67; Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*; Jackson Spielvogel, "Findhorn: The Evolution of a Spiritual Utopian Community," *The Journal of General Education* 37, no. 3 (1985): 231–44; Steven Sutcliffe, "A Colony of Seekers: Findhorn in the 1990s," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15 no. 2 (2000): 215–231, http://doi.org/10.1080/13537900050005985. On Damanhur, see Eva Meijerink, "The Game of Life: The Significance of Play in the Commune of Damanhur," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18, no. 2 (May 1, 2003): 155–68, http://doi.org/10.1080/1353790032000067491; Enzo Pace, "Damanhur, de La Religion À La Politique," *Ethnologie Française* 30, no. 4 (2000): 575–82; William James Metcalf, "Damanhur: a 'magical mystery tour" *Communities,* 103 (Summer 1999): 17-20. A collection of research on Auroville is available online at http://www.research.auroville.org.

[59] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*; Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*.

[60] Brown, ed., *Intentional Community*; Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias*.

[61] Although Robert Schehr and Marguerite Bouvard have highlighted the contributions of intentional communities to mainstream practices – in education, environment and social rights for instance.

documented,[62] why and how these are adopted and sustained, and the meanings their members ascribe to this process, remains largely under-explored.[63] What an overview of the existing collection of work on intentional communities reveals, however, is that there is no uniform set of practices that produces a successful utopian community outcome. On the contrary, it highlights the vast diversity of practices that emerge in communities to suit their unique sets of needs, and how these inevitably change throughout their lifespans, as highlighted in Pitzer's 'developmental communalism' framework.[64]

3.3.1 My Contributions to Intentional Scholarship

- Emphasising the Prefigurative Utopian Praxis of Alternative Lifestyle Practices

Emphasis in my research is placed not on the documentation of the alternative practices of the Auroville community, but on why and how these emerge and are established. While Lucy Sargisson has proposed the useful theoretical framework of a "transgressive"[65] utopianism through which to understand the significance of alternative, individual and communal lifestyle practices in contemporary intentional communities, even in her work, the animating processes by which these come to be embodied and enacted, in and by

[62] See Brown, ed. *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective*; Pitzer, ed. *America's Communal Utopias*; Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia.*

[63] For an excellent paper on the related aspect of constructions of self and spirituality, in Auroville, see Janne Meier, "Being Aurovilian: Constructions of Self, Spirituality and India in an International Community," *J@rgonia* 4, no. 10 (2006): 1 – 23.

[64] Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias*.

[65] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 11. Sargisson's theorisation of transgressive utopianism is examined in detail in the following chapter.

communities and their members, remains largely under-explored, probably due to limited fieldwork.[66]

I believe that turning our attention to such praxis is key to understanding whether and how intentional communities are engaged in a process of prefigurative utopianism, and will enable us to gain insight into how this process is sustained. This I consider to be the most theoretically and practically relevant contribution that could be gained from studying them. In this thesis, I examine the role of spirituality in informing such articulations in the Auroville context; it is the promise and experience of a *spiritual* dimension of a paradigm shift of consciousness, and its allied social change, that inspires Aurovilians to invest their lives into this communal experiment, and which is key to sustaining its utopian practice.

- Connecting with Kindred Practices beyond the Intentional Community Context

In my reading, intentional community scholarship also remains insular because it often fails to relate the practices it examines in these micro-societies with comparable ones exercised in wider social contexts, and to consider how they enrich theorisations of the latter, as well as provide relevant practical insights. Where I do highlight specific practices of the Auroville context, for example of anarchist decision-making, I will relate and examine these to comparable ones adopted in international social movements – in keeping with my objective of gaining insight into utopian practice with contemporary bearing beyond the immediate context of my field site. I hope that doing so can serve to extend the

[66] Two weeks was the longest period of time she spent per intentional community undertkaing field research both for *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Trasngression* and *Living in Utopia*, as per descriptions of methodology in each book.

theoretical scope and contribution of intentional community scholarship in general.

- Autoethnographic Sensibilities

Crucial for yielding insights into the animating processes of intentional community practices are insider understandings, perceptions and experiences of community life and its dynamics. In leveraging my personal experience and positionality as a member of the Auroville community to undertake this doctoral project, I make intentional use of autoethnographic methodology to actively include these unexplored subjective dimensions in producing an academic analysis of intentional community.

This is not insignificant given that to date, individual subjectivity is largely absent from or under-analysed in intentional community scholarship. For example, in Kanter's important work on the social mechanisms that ensure commitment in intentional communities,[67] the individual does not figure enough as participant in these, curtailing any understandings we may have related to personal motivation and agency. Even the account of Barry Shenker, a former kibbutz member who felt that existing literature did not adequately capture his or his peers' experiences, does not significantly differ from other work in that it remains a largely descriptive and theoretical account that lacks subjective experience and voices – including his own.[68]

Where the voices of community members are represented in work on intentional communities, these often do not include sustained analysis or grounding in ethnographic fieldwork. While Lucy Sargisson has carried out short-term (several days to two weeks) ethnographic fieldwork in intentional

[67] Kanter, *Commitment and Community*.
[68] Shenker, *Intentional Communities*.

communities in the UK and New Zealand, much of her work is a descriptive classification of these; voices of community members are present in her accounts, but they do not lead and interconnect our understanding of personal, social and communal lives.[69] And while Metcalf has published collections of community member narratives, these are largely left unanalysed.[70]

In Sum

While I am undertaking research on an intentional community that has already been studied, both my research focus and methodology consist of new approaches to intentional community scholarship. My work contributes tangible understandings of the processes that shape a 'utopian' community, by focussing on how the spiritual ideals of Auroville are active in shaping its public spheres. I specifically examine the community's socio-economic and political administration, and consider how my findings can contribute to other frameworks and practices, for example of anarchist organising. In doing so, I aim to produce research that is relevant beyond the context intentional communities, broadens the current scope of intentional community scholarship, and newly informs the latter with subjective sensibilities.

[69] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*; Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*.

[70] Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Lives*; Metcalf, *Shared Visions, Shared Lives*.

4 Understanding Auroville as A 'Utopian' Community

"Les utopies ne sont souvent que des réalités prématurées."[1] Alphonse Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine.

Fig. 10. Auroville kids at The Learning Community, Auroville.[2]

In this thesis, I examine Auroville through a unique theoretical lens that combines radically reformulated, current understandings of utopian practice with the concept of prefiguration. The latter is defining a burgeoning body of literature on contemporary social movements,[3] and I consider it to be

[1] "Utopias are often only premature realities." Quoted in "Utopie d'aujourd'hui, réalité de demain," *Georges Bertin*, accessed Oct 24, 2019, https://www.georges-bertin.com/utopie-daujourdhui-realite-de-demain/.

[2] Marco Saroldi, "The Learning Community Students," n.d., Photograph, Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.

[3] Marianne Maeckelbergh, "Doing is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalisation Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 10, no.1 (January 2011): 1-20, http://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2011.545223; Luke Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives,

pertinent to furthering analytical appreciation of utopianism, certainly in the singular context of Auroville. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the evolution of utopian practice and its theorisation, outlining the new body of work on which I build in analysing Auroville as a site of utopian practice. I also add new points of consideration for this literature, specifically developing on the analytical repertoire of the "principle of hope,"[4] that underscores much of it.[5]

In the second section, I explore the literature on prefigurative practice, and its parallels with utopian practice. While I do not argue that prefigurative action is necessarily utopian, I do maintain that theorisations of contemporary utopian practice, specifically in the context of intentional communities, can be enriched by being approached analytically through a prefigurative lens, given that these consist of strategic attempts at prefiguring new polities. In the third section, I explore the political relevance, similarities and differences embedded in how both prefigurative social movements and intentional communities articulate alternatives to mainstream forms of socio-political organisation.

Finally, I turn to the spiritual basis of the articulations of utopianism and community specific to Auroville. In the fourth section of this chapter, I delve into the uniquely, spiritually prefigurative nature of utopian practice in the Auroville context. In the fifth, I explore how the founding spiritual

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Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements," *Social Movement Studies* 14, no.1 (2015): 1-21, http://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.870883; Mathijs van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools: Prefiguration and Radical Politics in the Twenty-First Century," *Rethinking Marxism* 27, no. 2 (2015): 177-194, http://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2015.1007791.

[4] Based on Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. See Ernst Bloch et al, *The Principle of Hope*, *Volume 1*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[5] See Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, *The politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The art of Organising Hope* (Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan, 2015).

repertoire of Auroville engenders a "symbolic construction of community"[6] that enfolds diverse understandings and interpretations, and fosters an anarchic communal utopian practice.

4.1 The Evolution of Utopian Practice and its Theorisation

Lyman Tower Sargent, the long-standing and present-day bibliographer of utopian scholarship, speaks of "three faces of utopianism," three avenues through which the diverse expressions of utopianism have been articulated in human history.[7] One is literary – descriptions of fictitious, although sometimes familiarly situated, societies that present better alternatives to contemporary ones. Another is utopian social theory, which examines various roles of utopianism in society. Lastly, the only articulation that is enacted in an actual attempt to transform people and societies for the better: utopian practice.

In recent years, a variety of social phenomena – protests, practices, performances – that actively seek to effect positive social change, across realms from arts to politics, have increasingly been framed through this praxis lens of utopian scholarship.[8] Intentional communities were historically considered the locus of utopian practice, and remain significant by virtue of their potential to experiment with the transformation of societies as whole entities, albeit at a micro-level.[9] The framing of intentional communities as utopian experiments, however, is contentious for many, from academics to intentional community members

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[6] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community.*

[7] Sargent, *Utopianism*, 7.

[8] Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014); Ana Cecilia Dinerstein and Séverine Deneulin, "Hope Movements: Naming Mobilization in a Post-development World," *Development and Change* 43, no. 2 (2012): 585-602, http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01765.x.

[9] Although an exploration into communities that are not bound by place, such as communities of interest whose space may be the internet, or a circuit of festivals or workshops, and who act towards aspirational paradigms is still to be seriously undertaken under the umbrella of utopian praxis.

themselves. This is largely because of the dominant identification of the concept of utopia with a fixed ideal of perfection, which many intentional community members feel they are far from, and its association with a detailed, pre-determined blueprint, towards which much sound criticism has been levelled.[10]

Thomas Moore coined the term 'utopia' by combining the Greek words for 'good place' ("ou"- topos) and 'no place' ("eu"- topos), the implication being that utopia is an unattainable ideal – something that makes intentional communities as utopian experiments seem foolhardy.[11] Furthermore, the paradoxical double-entendre compromises both academic and public understandings of the potential and role of utopian practice in and for the advancement of human society.

Contemporary utopian scholars, however, maintain that inadequacy lies not with the state of realisation of these communal experiments, but rather in the "mistaken reading of utopias as perfection-seeking, blueprinting and desirous of perfection and finality."[12] In the last several decades, the utopian has been re-evaluated and redefined in social theory and literary forms. There has been a radical move away from the idea of utopia as synonymous with perfection, fixity and the intangible, towards the dynamic articulation of a utopian aspiration within and seeking alternatives to present 'mainstream' conditions – or perfectibility rather than perfection.[13] Literary utopias have emerged as "critical utopias,"[14] utopian practice as "transgressive"[15] utopias, and utopian social theory has

[10] Sargent, *Utopianism*; George Kateb, *Utopia and its Enemies* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
[11] Sargent, *Utopianism*.
[12] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 11.
[13] Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism*.
[14] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York & London: Methuen, 1986).
[15] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 11.

focussed on the role of utopianism in "the education of desire"[16] for a better way of life. The concept of what could constitute a utopia became internally diverse and changeable, imperfect, reflexive and self-critical in terms of form and content.

Thus reformulated, 'utopian' better reflects the practice and experience of intentional communities – certainly the experimental 'second wave' intentional communities founded in the 1960s and 1970s, Auroville among them. Of contemporary utopian communities such as Findhorn, Sargisson emphasises that these are not based on, nor do they "construct a blueprint for the ideal polity"[17]; on the contrary, there is "no full-stop to the process of politics in this utopianism . . . It is, above all, resistant to closure and it celebrates process over product."[18]

They stand in contrast to the "first wave" communal experiments of the 19th century that were largely based on blueprints provided by utopian social theorists and writers.[19] Often these were accompanied by city plans that would create the settings for such societies to be organised within. The perfectly planned city as the means to realising the ideal society became a project of urban planners in the 1950s, when The Mother first began imagining Auroville – the most famous contemporary project being Brazilia.

Key to this development in utopian conceptualisation was the seminal work of Marxist utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, a work in three volumes first published in German in 1954, and translated into English in 1986.[20] According to Bloch, utopia is not something fixed or preconceived, but something ever dynamic and anticipatory, embodied in what he refers to as the "utopian

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[16] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2011).

[17] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 3.

[18] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression,* 3.

[19] Bouvard, *The Intentional Community Movement*.

[20] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.

function." The role of the utopian function is to continually reach into the "Not-Yet-Become," therefore, the only relationship that the utopian function can have with a pre-defined utopia is to be corrective and critical of it.[21] The latter is based on an inviolable future status quo born out of present conceptions, which by its nature the utopian function challenges given its ever-forward orientation and evolution.[22]

Bloch advances the same argument in defining the relationship between utopian function and ideals, stating that "statics of the ideal predominates with an in itself already finished perfection; and it is precisely against this finished aspect that the utopian function has to prove its worth."[23] He further challenges utopian ideals to prove their worth by being connected to potential embedded in existing reality, so that it is "precisely this *intended perfection*, this wholly admitted anticipation, which makes the ideal accessible to utopian treatment."[24]

This forms the basis of the differentiation Bloch makes between "abstract" and "concrete" utopias, the latter being inextricably linked with the concept of the utopian function. He defines utopias that are abstract, whether literary or theoretical, as those that have no inherent connection with reality, "Pure wishful thinking, which has discredited utopias for centuries, both in pragmatic political terms and in all other expressions of what is desirable; just as if every utopia were an abstract one." [25] By contrast, concrete utopias articulate with and are anticipatory of the development of "tendencies" or "latencies" existing in the

[21] See not only Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, but also: Karl Mannheim and Bryan S. Turner, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1991); Paul Ricoeur and George H. Taylor, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[22] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.

[23] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 172.

[24] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 172.

[25] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 145.

present.[26] They are spaces and settings in which the utopian function is actively mediating between aspiration and present conditions, being "transcendent without transcendence."[27] The concept of a "concrete utopia" has been key in defining "hope movements" [28] – social mobilizations for autonomy that arise from popular aspirations for alternative paradigms to statist and neoliberal 'development' agendas – as well as economic experiments that prefigure alternatives to capitalism.[29]

The revolutionary development of utopian scholarship in the last thirty years, in which 'concrete' utopia is defined as prescient but not predetermined, an articulation rooted in and transforming of the present in an evolutionary process (however compromised and contradictory) through the work of the utopian function, has significant implications for how we view, understand, and evaluate utopian practice. It is through this theoretical lens that I examine Auroville as a 'utopian' experiment. Pertinently, I find this lens to be congruent with the community's autochthonous ontological framework of Integral Yoga, which sought to hasten the evolution of consciousness through an applied, anticipatory embodiment in the present. The Mother conceived of Auroville as an experiment dedicated to this process and purpose, something that continues to underpin the subjective self-understanding of the community by its members.[30]

I further qualify 'utopianism,' as conceived and practiced in the Auroville context, as "prefigurative," for although the community does have founding

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[26] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 223.

[27] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 146.

[28] Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, *The politics of Autonomy in Latin America.*

[29] Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2010); Lara Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16 no. 2 (2018): 501–17, http://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v16i2.1032.

[30] See "Early Talks," *Words of The Mother – I*, 251 – 276.

ideals,[31] their "treatment," as Bloch says, is applied experimentation that recognises process as generative of an ever-evolving outcome. Before I delve into developing a theoretical framework for utopian practice that fuses with prefiguration, I add some new points of consideration for the relationship between 'hope' and utopian practice, informed by the Auroville context.

4.1.1 A Note on 'Hope,' Disappointment, and Criticism

"It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce. . . [It] requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong."[32] Ernst Bloch.

"Utopia is . . . a life of hope. . . We can hope, fail, and hope again. We can live with repeated failure and still improve the societies we build."[33] Ruth Levitas.

Following Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, hope features strongly in the new body of theoretical and ethnographic work on utopian practice.[34] While hope is certainly a primary driving and sustaining force for a utopian endeavour, from autoethnographic observation and experience, I insist on adding the dimension of disappointment, which I have found to be key to fostering on-going mobilisation for social change within Auroville. I would go so far as to extrapolate from it the theory that it is the tension between these two forces – hope and disappointment – that engenders the dynamism at the core of grassroots, concrete utopian practice.

Criticism is a natural ally to disappointment in this dynamic. Tom Moylan, among the contemporary scholars of utopianism, has defined some utopias as "critical," in both the "Enlightenment sense of *critique* – that is the expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of both the genre itself and the

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[31] See section 5 of this chapter.

[32] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3

[33] Levitas, quoted in Sargent, *Utopianism*, 127.

[34] Dinerstein, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America*; Dinerstein and Deneulin, "Hope Movements: Naming Mobilization in a Post-development World"; Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century."

historical situation," and "in the nuclear sense of the *critical mass*."[35] To this double meaning of critical, I suggest we add the dimension of *self*-critique in order to better understand the subjective experiences of utopian practice in intentional communities, and thus complement our already existing understanding of what they represent: place-based, enacted critiques of the mainstream societies in which they are embedded, to and for which they seek to create alternatives.

The dynamic of self-critique within intentional communities has already been highlighted – in her work, Sargisson observes that intentional communities do not claim to be perfect, and that their members are "often excessively critical of their community."[36] This is certainly true of Auroville, and I would argue is key to fuelling a continued process of perfectibility, while the fundamental, underlying, animating and inspiring hope principle crucially serves to frame, and activate disappointment to serve this process. In the Auroville context, the ideals of the community, as outlined in its founding texts (*The Auroville Charter*, *To Be a True Aurovilian*, and *A Dream*), articulate and inspire the collective hope of the community, yet, at the same time, they are a constant gauge against which Aurovilians critique themselves, and each other. Of hope, Bloch says "it is in love with success rather than failure,"[37] yet Fredric Jameson points out that utopias "have something to do with failure, and tell us more about our own limits and weaknesses than they do about perfect societies." [38] Sargisson herself has remarked that they are "a mirror to the present designed to bring out flaws."[39]

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[35] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10.
[36] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 29.
[37] Bloch, The Principle of Hope, 3.
[38] Qtd. in Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 122.
[39] *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 112.

Excessive criticism is a phenomenon that many within the Auroville community consider damaging to the fabric of our society – and in my own opinion and experience, rightly so – however, it is important to note that an elective lack or active repression of questioning and critique in utopian community projects served to deny any human failings and was responsible for the perpetuation of unjust and unethical behaviour within them.[40] It is also worth highlighting that Auroville has a culture of satire that offers many a welcome respite from the high expectations we place upon ourselves: plays, skits, cartoons, videos, and articles produced by Aurovilians as a commentary on various aspects of our community have been common and long-standing vehicles through which we reflect on, critique, and laugh about ourselves and our society. An example famous in the Auroville context is the 'Academic Genius Brothers' Show' skit series, which has been on-going since my childhood, exploring key contemporary issues and debates within the community.

Significantly, the spiritual worldview of the Auroville community plays a crucial role in framing, and assists in weathering, our 'disappointment' with the human limitations and flaws that we Aurovilians routinely face in ourselves and others in community life and development, as well as in its overarching course. These are understood to be symptomatic of the overarching stage of the spiritual consciousness in which humanity is presently caught. Importantly, because it is understood that this spiritual consciousness is in a process of evolution, and that we can choose – and if we have joined Auroville, it is presumed have chosen – to actively participate in it, this spiritual worldview is also key to sustaining hope. As such, it is crucial for prevailing with the project of Auroville, in the face of what

[40] This is particularly prevalent in communities with hierarchical and charismatic leadership, such as for example, Rajneeshpuram. See Latkin, "From Device to Vice."

Sargisson observes are the "frustrating" challenges of transgressive utopian practice.[41] This corroborates similar observations made about the role of spirituality in other collective contexts, notably that spiritual practices have assisted in "fighting burnout, political cynicism, and hopelessness," in social movements.[42]

To be faced by individual and collective limitations in the face of attempting to embody high ideals is no easy undertaking, and Sargent rightly observes that intentional communities, due to their immersive nature, are a particularly intensive experience of this:

> ultimately utopianism is the transformation of everyday life. And intentional communities are particularly radical in that their members are willing to experiment with the transformation of their own lives. And all members of intentional communities must deal with this transformation every day.[43]

While this challenging process provokes considerable self-criticism within intentional communities, Sargisson also highlights that members "see themselves as playing a transformative role,"[44] view their communities as spaces in which change is possible and can at the very least be explored. Being empowered to actively and intentionally (re)shape lifestyles, practices, and forms of social organisation through on-going experimentation thus keeps hope alive through enactment. In the Auroville context, this hope is embedded, legitimised and sustained within a broader vision and commitment to Integral Yoga's ontology of spiritual evolution.

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[41] *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 2.

[42] Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 185.

[43] Sargent, *Utopianism*, 49.

[44] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 29.

4.2 Utopian Practice and Prefiguration

One of the key theoretical and ethnographic contributions of this thesis is to further the collective theorisation of utopian practice outlined above by qualifying it as prefigurative, and in the Auroville context specifically, as spiritually prefigurative. I do so given that the practice of prefiguration is one in which a collective emulates in the present the attitudes, social relations, culture, and organisation it envisions for the future, through "experimental and experiential"[45] means.[46] Scholarship on prefiguration emerged from and remains focussed on political practice – with a few divagations, notably into economic and environmental practices.[47] Its conceptualisation thus also stands to gain in breath from this bridging with utopian practice.

The term 'prefigurative' was coined in 1970 by the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, an early endorser of the Auroville project,[48] to herald the advent of a newly future-oriented "prefigurative culture," one in which "it will be the child – and not the parent and grandparent – that represents what is to come."[49] In 1977, Carl Boggs used the term 'prefiguration' to define "the embodiment within the political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are [its] ultimate goal."[50] Following Boggs, early scholars of prefiguration conceptualised a broad spectrum of social

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[45] van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools," 189.

[46] Maeckelbergh, "Doing is Believing."

[47] Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century"; Kelvin Mason, "Becoming Citizen Green: Prefigurative Politics, Autonomous Geographies, and Hoping against Hope," *Environmental Politics* 23, no. 1 (2014): 140-58, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.775725.

[48] See p. 10 of this thesis for an extract from her letter of endorsement.

[49] Margaret Mead, "Prefigurative Cultures and Unknown Children," in *Youth: Divergent Perspectives*, ed. Peter K. Manning (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), 204. Margaret Mead first wrote about "prefigurative culture" in *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

[50] Carl Boggs, "Marxism, prefigurative communism and the problem of workers' control," *Radical America*, 6 (Winter): 100, 1977.

movement practices as prefigurative,[51] but in the last decade the literature on prefiguration has been dominated by a narrow focus on the horizontal forms of organising and decision-making employed in contemporary alter-globalisation movements.[52] This ethnographic focus is accompanied by a theoretical shift that considers only such "strategic" practices as prefigurative – as in those that would bring about political change –, disregarding the role and significance of associated socio-cultural, lifestyle practices in prefiguring social movements' overarching goals.[53]

The omission is surprising considering the recent history of "New Left"[54] social movements, which were precipitated and shaped by changes in culture and lifestyle (the association effectively captured in the feminist movement's iconic slogan "the personal is political"). Analysis of how these movements have articulated a prefigurative politics also ignores this social dimension. [55] Contemporary literature is so focussed on strategic political practices that it even omits alternative, notably spiritual, practices that actively inform these, such as the moments of silence and meditation in decision-making assemblies noted by other academics.[56]

Thus, while in Chapter 6 of this thesis I explore in detail a participatory decision-making process in Auroville – the "classic" choice of prefiguration

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[51] See Wini Breines, *Community and organization in the New Left 1962-68: The great refusal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Barbara Epstein, *Political protest and cultural revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[52] Maeckelbergh, *The Will of The Many*; David Graeber, *Direct Action: an ethnography* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010); Benjamin Franks, "The direct action ethic: From 59 upwards," *Anarchist Studies* 11, no. 1 (2003): 13–41.

[53] Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration."

[54] 1960s, culminating in 68.

[55] Paul Raekstad, "Revolutionary Practice and Prefigurative Politics: A Clarification and Defense," *Constellations* 25, no. 3 (2018): 359-72, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12319.

[56] Anita Chari, "The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment," *New Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2016): 236, http://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153192; James K. Rowe, "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Left Social Movements," *New Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2016): 206-25, http://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153191.

scholars[57] – I focus on spiritual practices that are employed within it. For these are key to articulating a 'prefigurative' politics in the Auroville context, that is, prefigurative of a spiritualised polity. In so doing, I revitalise early scholarship of prefiguration, which included the set of cultural practices that were associated with political mobilisations.

The restrictive scope on strategic political practice is perhaps why prefiguration is barely even conceptually associated with utopianism. A few scholars of prefiguration mention in passing that prefigurative action embodies "utopic" or "utopian" alternatives[58]; rare are those who actually engage with contemporary theorisations of utopian practice in doing so.[59] While I do not make the argument that prefigurative practice should de facto be considered utopian, prefiguration is central to how I understand utopian practice in the Auroville context.

This is because, in prefigurative practice, activists are "intentionally prefigurative of the 'other world(s)' they would like to see,"[60] using organisational means which reflect their desired ideals so that "the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present,"[61] despite, within, and transformative of the limitations of the latter.[62] In this thesis I examine aspects of Auroville's political and economic organisation – both their historical development and current practice – and how these have been strategically informed by, and seek to embody, the community's founding ideals in order to prefigure a spiritualised society. For

[57] Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration,"4.

[58] See Yates "Rethinking Prefiguration"; Jeffrey S. Juris, *Networking futures: The movements against corporate globalisation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[59] See Dinerstein and Deneulin "Hope Movements," Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century."

[60] Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many,* 4.

[61] Marianne Maeckelbergh, "Doing is Believing," 4.

[62] Maeckelbergh, "Doing is Believing," 4.

example, in Chapter 8 I consider economic experiments that proved to be strategic in prefiguring the community's economic ideals by culminating in the establishment of a community institution whose organisation embodies and engenders these ideals.

My conceptualisation of how utopian practice in Auroville is 'prefigurative,' however, reaches beyond the strategic political and economic dimensions that I examine in this thesis. I consider it to be an overarching qualifier, because "to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an 'alternative world' in the present,"[63] and the premise and practice of the Auroville project is to prefigure an integral, alternative, spiritualised society. Other scholars of intentional communities are beginning to adopt the concept of prefiguration to describe these as well, given that they are a radical, embodied exercise in redefining society according to alternative values, of the present and for the future.[64]

4.2.1 Prefiguration, Utopianism, and Social Change

Not all utopian practice is tied to political change in mainstream society, while prefigurative practice is expected to enact and engender such change. Even scholars who theorise a wider scope of practices than political movements as prefigurative consider this to be key to defining them as such. For example, while Yates argues that prefiguration can refer either to alternative political mobilisation, or to alternative everyday practices, he upholds that these must be relevant beyond the bounds of the groups[65] within which these are experimented:

> [P]refiguration necessarily combines the experimental creating of 'alternatives'

[63] Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration," 4.

[64] Carine Farias, "That's What Friends Are For: Hospitality and Affective Bonds Fostering Collective Empowerment in an Intentional Community," *Organization Studies* (2017): 1-19, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616670437; Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century."

[65] Yates' ethnographic research was undertaken in social centres in Barcelona, Spain.

> within either mobilisation-related or everyday activities, with attempts to ensure their future political relevance.[66]

Both utopian communities and prefigurative politics are, however, criticised for being apolitical. Chantal Mouffe condemns prefigurative social movements for adopting an "exodus approach,"[67] from the public sphere; a common criticism of utopian communities is that they draw energy and activism away from working for social change in mainstream society, that they are insular and escapist projects.

Yet, activists and scholars of each maintain that they are engaged in the articulation of new and alternative repertoires of social and political organisation and practices:

> By their very existence intentional communities broaden the choice of values and institutions for society as a whole, a welcome addition to any democratic society which upholds pluralism.[68]

Intentional communities are noted as having made little known but significant contributions to the broader societies in which they are embedded, as harbingers of forward-looking practices born from and reflective of progressive values, later to be adopted into the mainstream.[69] These were developed through what was effectively the politicisation of their everyday, lifestyle practices, leading Sargisson to remark that their members are to be reconceived as "active citizens," instead of "dropouts."[70] For example, New Harmony, the historical intentional community founded by Robert Owen in Indiana in 1814, is recognized as a pioneer of free

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[66] Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration," 13.
[67] Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 111.
[68] Bouvard, *The Intentional Community Movement,* 5.
[69] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*.
[70] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 74.

public education and free public libraries open to men and women, which since have become United States institutions.[71]

Over the last fifty years, Auroville has been a focal point for pioneering innovative forms of collective and economic organisation, renewable technologies, sustainable architecture, educational practices, and social enterprise, with award-winning local, regional, national, and international reach and impact: the Auroville Earth Institute holds the UNESCO Chair of Earthern Architecture, researching and educating people worldwide in earthern building technologies; Tamil Nadu state textbooks have recently incorporated educational content on waste management from the Auroville social enterprise Wasteless, reaching millions of Tamil children.[72]

Fig. 11. Participatory action research in Auroville's Aikiyam Outreach School with Wasteless.[73]

[71] Schehr, *Dynamic Utopia*, 28.

[72] See "Awards," Auroville, last updated Aug 10, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/884.

[73] Marco Saroldi, "Aikiyam School," n.d., *Auroville Outreach Media* digital archive.

I have heard several fellow Aurovilians describe these as simply "by-products" of the underlying spiritual mission of the community,[74] and it is fascinating for me to observe that a spiritually-inspired society gives rise to progressive practices (a correlation which of course cannot be indiscriminately generalised). This active role of spirituality in (re)shaping public life is especially interesting to consider given that a prevalent criticism of spiritual practice is that it renders individuals apolitical; although of relevance to note is that academic work endorsing this critique is based on Buddhist-based practices, such as mindfulness, which emphasise detachment from worldly life.[75] By contrast, the spiritual worldview of Integral Yoga is one that sees the world as a realm to be divinised through intentional engagement, and is key to giving rise in Auroville to spiritually-informed action across realms. This includes the community's political life, as is explored in Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis.

A core premise of the contemporary prefiguration scholars and activists who focus on alternative forms of organising and decision-making in social movements is that such prefigurative politics articulate an alternative to the state. To ally with, or make demands of, the government – "emancipation within, acceptance by, or incorporation into current power structures" – would thus invalidate their prefigurative nature.[76] Auroville, however, is formally enmeshed with the Indian Government – something that almost unfailingly prompts scepticism, and the question of co-optation in talks I have given in both academic and non-academic contexts.

In Chapter 5 of this thesis, I consider the relationship between Auroville and

[74] Most recently at "The Bridge," Auroville's fiftieth anniversary conference.

[75] Chari, "The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment," 227. See Slavoj Žižek, "From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism," *Cabinet* 2 (2001): n. pag.

[76] van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools," 178.

the Indian Government, arriving at the unlikely conclusion that it may, in fact, be a government-enabled anarchy. This is an important, albeit controversial dimension to examine for proponents of prefigurative projects, especially given that among the key pronouncements of political scholars that are critical of prefigurative movements is that they fail to produce lasting, political change precisely due to a lack of engagement with existing institutions.[77] In Chapters 4 and 6, I consider the development and practice of Auroville's internal governance, revealing the challenges faced in attempting to establish perennial forms of anarchist organising in the face of an increasingly complex community. This trajectory and experience is relevant in light of questions as to how anarchist communities sustain and reproduce themselves,[78] and of the criticism of anarchist social movements such as Occupy Wall Street failing to do so.[79]

4.3 The Integral, Spiritually Prefigurative Nature of Auroville's Utopian Practice

A key question for scholars of prefiguration is "Where does the political begin and end in the case of building alternatives?"[80] In *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, Sargisson argues that alternative lifestyle practices in intentional communities are "politicized partly because of their context: the fact that they occur in a consciously created and alternative space . . . and also by the consciousness of the actions themselves."[81] I see Auroville as belonging to and standing out from other prefigurative projects in that is an *integral* exercise in

[77] Mouffe, *Agonistics*: *Thinking the world politically*, 111.
[78] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*; Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration."
[79] James K. Rowe and Myles Carroll, "What the Left Can Learn From Occupy Wall Street," *Studies in Political Economy* 96 no.1 (2015): 145-166, https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2015.11674941.
[80] Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration," 5.
[81] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 65.

prefiguration, in both the dictionary and the spiritualised, Aurobindonian use of the term. While most intentional communities focus on – even though they may not be restricted to – a particular aspect of collective living (for example, eco-villages who focus on environmentally sustainable lifestyles), and social or political movements typically engage with specific causes and demands (for example, political autonomy), Auroville seeks to engage with all aspects of life in prefiguring society *as a whole*, and to do so spiritually, following Sri Aurobindo's iconic phrase "All life is yoga."[82]

Under this aspirational aegis, a multiplicity of pursuits are undertaken, from art to engineering, as well as the development of innovative and alternative communal practices, for example of governance, economics, and education. Each of these pursuits is to be engaged with consciousness in order to prompt a spiritually prefigurative process. It is important to note that there are no explicit protocols for doing so, for Integral Yoga is a fundamentally anarchist spirituality in that it recognizes and affirms that each individual has a unique spiritual path and practice.

While these are today institutionalised to a certain extent, reformulation is common given the community's overarching experimental and evolutionary ethos and praxis. This is consistent with Sargisson's observations of utopian practice in intentional communities, which she describes as "internally subversive" as well as "flexible and resistant to permanence and order."[83] It also echoes the "inherently experimental and experiential" nature of prefigurative practice.[84] This flexible and open-ended political practice, which Sargisson theorises as part of a

[82] Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga - I*, 8.
[83] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 2.
[84] van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools," 189.

"transgressive" [85] utopianism, is inscribed in Auroville's founding political philosophy concept and ideal, and is deliberately designed to serve a spiritually prefigurative process of evolution.

In 1972, just a few years after Auroville was established, someone asked The Mother, "What political organisation do you want for Auroville?" and she responded "a divine anarchy."[86] She never defined a system of governance for the community, for she anticipated that this would constrain its capacity to develop itself in accordance with the progressive spiritualisation of life, which its members were to consciously participate in hastening. The kind of society that would emerge from this process could not be abstractly envisioned, it was to be elaborated in practice. It is this concretely utopian, embodied and anticipatory articulation with a spiritualised evolution that leads me to theorise Auroville's utopian practice as spiritually prefigurative. Interestingly, this spiritually anticipatory dimension harks back to the original use of the term 'prefiguration,' which has its roots in religion, and refers to a prophetic foreshadowing.[87]

The practice of Integral Yoga is to cultivate not only "spiritual consciousness within but also spiritual life without," by engaging in pursuits of worldly life with an applied spirituality, and thereby participating in transforming these.[88] Thus the community has a wide range of activities – commercial and social enterprises, alternative schooling, environmental restoration, a vibrant artistic and cultural life – that would not typically be considered 'political' or 'spiritual.' If the

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[85] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 11.
[86] *Words of The Mother – I*, 219.
[87] Raekstad, "Revolutionary Practice and Prefigurative Politics," 361.
[88] Sri Aurobindo, qtd. in Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, 9. It is important here to note that there are no prescribed spiritual practices or protocols in Auroville; Integral Yoga is a fundamentally anarchist spirituality in that it recognizes and affirms that each individual has a unique spiritual path, and is sovereign in its discovery and enactment.

aspiration of Aurovilians, as a polity, is an embodied, individual and collective evolution of spiritual consciousness in everyday life, then any activity – a physical discipline, artistic production, political forum – in which they intentionally engage with this spiritually prefigurative process is fundamental to Auroville's development as a spiritual polity. In the following paragraphs I will elucidate the spiritually prefigurative nature of three aspects of community life – education, work, and art, what Bloch would refer to as their "utopian treatment."[89] In so doing I will also point to some of the challenges that such prefigurative treatment necessarily entails, in attempting to embody a more spiritually evolved future into the limitations of the present.

Education in any society is a key site of deliberate social reproduction, and alternative pedagogies have been an important feature of many intentional communities; both Auroville and Findhorn are notable educational centres. Auroville has several primary and secondary schools, funded in part by the Indian Ministry of Human Resources Development, which engage and experiment with the pedagogical philosophy of "Integral Education" based on Integral Yoga and initially developed at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.[90] The premise of Integral Education is to foster a spiritually conscious, values-based, well-rounded and self-directed development of the student; the objective is to form individuals who are aware of both the inner and outer dimensions and potentialities of education, and of the significance of pursuing such personal development throughout their lives.

This is relevant to realising the ideal of Auroville as a place "of an unending education, constant progress, and a youth that never ages," as well as that of a

[89] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 172.

[90] Tanmaya, ed., *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education: A New Education for a New Consciousness* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2014).

society that builds on "discoveries from without and from within" to prefigure a spiritualised future.[91] While Auroville has developed original pedagogical practices adopted internationally, such as Awareness Through the Body, education has been a source of considerable contention within the community due to the perpetuation of mainstream educational practices within some of its schools, such as, for example, preparing students for Indian and international examinations in order to enable them to easily integrate into higher education institutions.

Work in Auroville is another significant site for spiritual development, central to community life given the founding statement that "Auroville is for those who want to do the yoga of work."[92] This meant that work was to be undertaken as a yogic practice through which individuals would progress spiritually, while also participating in a transformation of the world, by infusing consciousness into their fields of engagement. [93] According to recent research, the ideals and understandings of spiritualised work are actively practiced by Aurovilians.[94] While the flexible nature of work in the community – the ability to change professions, for instance, is both easy and commonplace – is celebrated for offering individuals opportunities to pursue their interests, there are also issues with people who lack competence for their chosen work nevertheless persevering with it. The fact that this provides them with an opportunity for self-development is valued by other members of the community, however, the social and economic cost to the collective of their occupying positions they do not adequately fill is also a source of

[91] *Auroville Charter*.
[92] *Words of The Mother – I*, 222.
[93] Work seen as service towards something higher also has roots in religious traditions. See Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 88.
[94] Pommerening, "Soul of Sustainability?"; Seidlitz, *Integral Yoga at Work*.

dissatisfaction. Despite this, such situations are often not addressed due to a community culture of reticence in overruling individual members.

Outside of the realm of work – and within it for some – creative pursuits are among the most popular self-development activities. Art has long played a central role in the utopian imaginary because it offers a space in which to challenge present conventions, envision and embody alternatives. The Burning Man festival, a radical gathering held annually in the ephemeral "Black Rock City," constructed for and disassembled after the event in the Nevada desert, is perhaps the largest and most popular contemporary collective exercise of this, and also draws significantly on spiritual repertoires.[95] In Auroville, much artistic practice and performance is inspired by the body of literature on Integral Yoga and by the community's ideals. For the township's 50th anniversary in 2018, Aurovilian artists created multimedia works based on chapters of a key spiritual text, *On the way to Supermanhood*, and a theatre group adapted chapters of the same volume for stage performance.[96] The community's ideal of "human unity – in diversity"[97] was symbolised and explored in a multidisciplinary community performance, "Soul Encounters for the Auroville Soul," which fused dance forms from various cultures, and culminated in a hatha yoga sequence that represented the epitome of spiritualised physical embodiment. These two recent works are representative of a rich and commonplace legacy of artistic practice in Auroville, the arts thus constituting a significant realm of exploration in spiritual utopianism.

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[95] See Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

[96] Satprem, *On the Way to Supermanhood* (New York: Institute for Evolutionary Research, 1985).

[97] "Auroville in Brief," Auroville, last updated Nov 20, 2017, https://www.auroville.org/contents/95.

Fig. 12. Closing Meditation of Soul Encounters for the Auroville Soul, 2018.[98]

As evidenced by these three pursuits, embodying consciousness is essential in defining them as spiritually prefigurative – something which will be explored in the context of Auroville's participatory decision-making processes in Chapter 6. It is also central to the understanding of what it means to become Aurovilian. I say 'become,' because 'Aurovilian' is perceived not simply as the formal status of 'community member,' but as an ideal – that of a "willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness," which many consider themselves to be only working towards, and which can thus itself be considered spiritually prefigurative in nature.

4.4 Auroville as a Utopian Community

'Community' is a term commonly evoked by and used to refer to such a wide spectrum of human associations that it is hard to define meaningfully. For this reason it has been challenged as a basis of analysis, while its theorisation has known several permutations.[99] When I refer in this thesis to the "Auroville

[98] Manohar_Auroville, "SEAS Auroville final performance," Flickr accessed Oct 15, 2019, https://www.flickr.com/photos/manohar_auroville/albums/72157693615729715.

[99] Amit and Rapport, *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*, 211.

community," or "community members," I mean the official members of Auroville – those that hold the status of "Aurovilian" – and am thus basing myself on a categorical definition of "community."[100] The term could be used, however, to refer to a wider demographic that its members – by including its employees and volunteers, for example – evoking early structural definitions of community that are based on social organisation.[101]

I restrict myself to Aurovilians in this thesis, because of its focus on how community members have intentionally engaged with Auroville's ideals in the development of the community's institutions. While other, more limited forms of membership exist, such as "Partner of an Aurovilian," or "Friend of Auroville," these do not empower individuals to fully participate in shaping the community, notably due to the fact that they can neither participate in communal decision-making, nor manage Auroville's enterprises or services. However, an academic exploration of whether and how the community's ideals shape the engagement of non-Aurovilian individuals active within the township has yet to be undertaken, and could yield significant insights, for example for the social reproduction of utopian practice.

As of August 2019, Aurovilians number over 3000, and are of 58 different nationalities.[102] To embody such diversity is key to the utopian imaginary of Auroville as a community. An early statement by The Mother, displayed on the landing page of Auroville's website, states

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[100] Prevalent in contemporary work inspired by Benedict Anderson's conception of 'imagined community.' See Amit and Rapport, *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*.

[101] See Émile Durkheim, *De la division du travail social* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1893); Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1887).

[102] "Census July 2019 – Auroville Population," Auroville, last updated July 2, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/3329.

> Auroville wants to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity.[103]

While some joined the community in its early years – during which The Mother was alive, and even at her behest – Auroville continually accepts new members. Some individuals choose to leave the community, sometimes to return. The category of "Aurovilian" itself, therefore, contains a vastly diverse array of experiences of community membership – including many additional reasons beyond those highlighted here.

Ph. Marco Saroldi

Fig. 13. Laughter Day in Auroville.[104]

It is not the objective of this thesis to investigate the composition of community in Auroville, or of these subjective experiences. This would entail an in-depth exploration of the micro and multi-dimensional aspects of community-

[103] Auroville, accessed Sep 14, 2019, https://www.auroville.org.
[104] Marco Saroldi, "Laughter Day," n.d., *Auroville Outreach Media* digital archive.

building, such as various forms and practices of association, the development of a felt sense of belonging, and the fostering of joint commitment.[105] Such an investigation could, however, provide an excellent complement to this research by determining the role of interpersonal sociation for informing and sustaining the enactment of Auroville's utopian practice(s), the development of its community institutions (which this thesis examines) in particular. The latter would be especially relevant given that Auroville currently consists of a small, 'face-to-face' society, in which scholars of community note significant overlap between personal networks and community institutions.[106]

Overall, examining processes of community-building in intentional communities is surprisingly limited. Kanter's seminal work on commitment in intentional communities focused on the formal mechanisms that secured the commitment of individual members to the community – such as the commitment of financial resources – rather than affective dimensions such as resonance with the communities' ideals, or associative ones such as shared projects.[107] Engagement with the wider body of research on community in intentional community scholarship could thus be valuable for furthering academic understandings in both fields.

The theorisation of community that I consider to be indispensable for this thesis is Cohen's "symbolic construction"[108] of community, for it is key to understanding the anarchic nature of Auroville's communal utopian practice.[109] It

[105] Amit and Rapport, *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*, 6.

[106] See Amit and Rapport, *Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Problem of Human Commonality*.

[107] Rosabeth Kanter, *Commitment and Community.*

[108] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*.

[109] Explored in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

offers an analytical lens through which we can understand how the ways in which Aurovilians articulate with the community's ideals are both shared *and* internally contested. This "unity in diversity"[110] – a core principle in Sri Aurobindo's body of work – is one of Auroville's ideals of community.

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community* Cohen outlined a new way of defining community based on meaning rather than social organisation, challenging previous structural conceptualisations. Rather than defining a 'community' by its external form and qualifiers, he proposed that it be understood through the subjective experience of its members, stating

> The quintessential referent of community is that its members make, or believe they make, a similar sense of things either generally or with respect to specific and significant interests, and further, that they think that that sense may differ from one made elsewhere.[111]

Cohen argued that a repertoire of symbols held in common is what enables members to construct and maintain a sense of community. However, he specified that "the sharing of the symbol is not necessarily the sharing of the meaning."[112] A community could contain a diversity of interpretations and relationships to communal symbols, so that it effectively "incorporates and encloses difference."[113]

This is particularly important to consider in studying intentional communities, in which a uniformity of views, attitudes, values and practices, achieved by the submission of individuals to the collective, is often presumed. This may reflect the social experiments of blueprinted utopian communities, and ones organised around charismatic leaders, including Indian gurus – such as Twin Oaks in its early incarnation as a behaviourist community based on the behavioural

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[110] Sri Aurobindo, *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*, Vol. 15, *Social and Political Thought* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972), 499.

[111] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 16.

[112] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 16.

[113] Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, 74.

psychologist B.F. Skinner's utopian novel *Walden Two*, or Rajneeshpuram, described in Chapter 3. However, it cannot be transposed to other communal experiments, such as Auroville, that are based on anarchic and consensual principles of participation.

Auroville is not an entirely non-prescriptive utopian endeavour in that it does have founding ideals, and even a model for a city plan, determined by a founding figure who was recognised as a spiritual guru. While there was no strictly specified societal 'blueprint' for Auroville to realise, The Mother did draft *A Dream* in 1954, which envisioned an ideal society. She also wrote a short, four-point charter for the community, the *Auroville Charter* in 1968, and a guiding document for individual members, *To be a True Aurovilian*, in 1970. She even made specific provisos for certain aspects of the community's collective organisation, notably in the sphere of economy (to which Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis are dedicated).

These elements provide the basis on which Auroville enacts a prefigurative utopianism. They have, and continue to foster, a prefigurative utopian practice by providing what Cohen would refer to as a shared, symbolic repertoire that community members are committed to, and around which they mobilise, individually and collectively, to embody a more spiritualised society. The intentional absence of a defined approach to realising Auroville's ideals has fostered a plural and experimental environment, bound beyond differences in its shared commitment to the project of Auroville, as Cohen's framework theorises.

While the three foundational documents of the community cited above – the *Auroville Charter*, *A Dream*, and *To Be a True Aurovilian* – are related to by Aurovilians as inspirational texts and not dogmatic decrees, there is a trend of using specific statements made by The Mother regarding Auroville during its

founding years to lend authority to certain views and projects. This echoes research on community (based on Cohen's work) that explores the invocation of communal ideals for opposing agendas.[114] Whether and how these now historical statements should be applied and evaluated in the community's current context is frequently questioned. Notably, the community's leading archivist has pointed out that even within the short period in which The Mother was actively envisioning Auroville, her statements on the community's purpose demonstrate a significant evolution in conceptualisation.[115] Opinions are also contested about how the very figure of The Mother should be related to, as will be revealed in an ethnographic rendering of Auroville's participatory decision-making process, in Chapter 6. The chapter also explores how certain forms of invoking and interacting to her statements and writings on Auroville are disputed. Chapter 7 examines their articulation in economic administration, Chapter 8 in mobilising prefigurative experiments.

4.5 A New Theoretical Approach

I build on the bodies of work on utopian practice and prefiguration outlined in this chapter in examining Auroville as a uniquely spiritually prefigurative utopian experiment. Previous academic work on Auroville has addressed its utopian dimension through a static rather than dynamic lens, by comparing the status and progress of the project with its founding ideals, and pointing out discrepancies.[116] Little has been done to examine whether and how the

[114] See Edward Young's "Where the daffodils blow: elements of communal imagery in a northern suburb," in *Symbolising Boundaries*: *Identity and Diversity in British Cultures*, ed. Anthony P. Cohen, 123-140.

[115] See Gilles Guigan, *Auroville in Mother's Words* (Auroville Press: Auroville, 2018).

[116] Larry Shinn, "Auroville: Visionary Images and Social Consequence in a South Indian Utopian Community," *Religious Studies* 20, no. 2 (1984): 239-253, http://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500016024; Jessica Namakkal, "European Dreams, Tamil Land:

community's founding ideals are inspiring the concrete development of the Auroville experiment, which is the crux of my research. Scholars have focussed instead on how individuals are inspired by and relate to Auroville's ideals in their personal lives, and how they use these as frameworks through which to construct meaning around community life.[117]

Whereas attention has already been placed on analysing different systems within the community, such as its economy,[118] or overall organisation,[119] the reflexive processes and agency with which Aurovilians shape these systems, and how these are informed by, and embody, utopian aspirations have not been duly explored. This articulation is the very phenomenon I consider relevant for developing an understanding of a prefigurative utopian practice, and for contemporary utopian practice *tout court*, for Auroville does not rely on establishing a predetermined utopian societal model, as the first wave of blueprinting utopian communities did. It attempts to prefigure modes of social organisation that can foster a spiritualised society, in a perpetual learning process dedicated to conscious evolution.

Auroville and the Paradox of a Postcolonial Utopia," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 6, no. 1 (2012): 59-88, http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jsr.2012.0006.

[117] Marie Horassius, "Aire De Recherche, Ère De La Quête Du Sens': Ethnographie d'une Utopie, l'Exemple de la Communauté Internationale d'Auroville" (MA Thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2013); Janne Meier, "Being Aurovilian: Constructions of Self, Spirituality and India in an International Community."

[118] Marco Gonzales, "Beyond the Capitalist Paradigm? An exploration of the diverse economy of Auroville" (MA Thesis, International Institute of Social Studies, 2012); Pushan Bhowmick, "An Analysis of the Auroville Economic System (AVES): Towards a Sustainable and Ethical Economy" (MA Thesis, The American University of Paris, 2011).

[119] Rakesh Kapoor, "Auroville: A spiritual-social experiment in human unity and evolution," Futures Vol 39 (2007): 632-643, http://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2006.10.009; Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, "Auroville: A Practical Experiment in Utopian Society"; Marie Horassius, "Ethnographie d'une Utopie, l'Exemple de la Communauté Internationale d'Auroville."

5 Auroville, Prefiguring a Utopian Anarchic Polity?

"No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried."[1] Winston Churchill.

"'Should Auroville have any more new committees?' The Mother does not agree to any new committees for Auroville. She says: 'More committees, more useless talk'."[2] The Mother.

As highlighted in the literature on intentional communities and utopia in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, respectively, utopian communities have historically been based on ideal blueprints that predetermined how society should be organised. Among the founding ideals for Auroville as a spiritualised society, however, is to prefigure a "Divine Anarchy"[3]: a polity responsive to the evolution of consciousness that Integral Yoga anticipated, and that could be (re)formulated accordingly. This chapter will consider the anarchic nature of Auroville as a polity, from its early years to today, while Chapter 6 will focus on prefigurative spiritual practices in Auroville's collective decision-making processes.

The first part of this chapter will consider The Mother's original ideas for Auroville's 'political' [4] organisation – in Auroville simply referred to as 'organisation', or as 'collective organisation' – as a 'Divine Anarchy', and her charismatic authority during the founding period of the community. It will also examine how Auroville's relationship with the Indian government is enabling of its internal anarchic practice. A detailed ethnographic description and assessment of

[1] Winston Churchill, House of Commons speech, November 11, 1947.
[2] *Words of The Mother – I*, 208.
[3] *Words of The Mother – I*, 218.
[4] The term 'political' is not used in Auroville to define our collective organisation or decision-making processes. For many Aurovilians, the words "political" and "politics" have negative connotations: they are associated with the existence of a ruling class that abuses its power to serve its own interests, and with factional or individual agendas. For purpose of analytical transferability, in this thesis I do use the term 'political' in referring to the Auroville context, in ethnographic chapters qualifying or replacing it with the corresponding Aurovilian nomenclature.

the latter will be the object of the remainder of the chapter, which aims to aliment and further the empirical, activist body of research on prefigurative, anarchist forms of political organising in grassroots social movements.[5]

While this literature is focused on 'direct actions,' strategic enactments of popular protest within social movements, in Auroville, anarchist forms of decision-making have been used to shape an entire intentional society, offering an unparalleled opportunity to assess this mode of political organisation. Such an examination is directly relevant for the Auroville community, within which there is a pervasive sentiment that our internal governance is onerous and uninspired, and needs to be restructured. This internal critique mirrors concerns recently raised in academic research, on the sustainability, effectiveness, and equitability of such forms of radical political practice.[6] The chapter also responds to an open question in intentional community research, on how anarchist communities are able to perpetuate themselves.[7]

5.1 The ideal of a 'Divine Anarchy'

"What political organisation do you want for Auroville?," someone asked The Mother in 1972, four years after the founding of the community. "An amusing definition occurs to me," she replied: "a divine anarchy."[8] When she passed away in 1973 – just five years after Auroville was founded – she left no blueprint for Auroville, no plan for how it should be governed (in her words 'organised'[9]), no

[5] David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement* (London: Allen Lane, 2013); Graeber, *Direct Action*; Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many*.

[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rowe and Carroll, "What the Left Can Learn From Occupy Wall Street."

[7] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*.

[8] *Words of The Mother – I*, 218.

[9] See *The Mother on Auroville*, 70. While both the terms 'governance' and 'organisation' are used in Auroville, many prefer the latter because it does not have the hierarchical connotations of the former.

designated individuals who should assume this responsibility. In keeping with its philosophical basis of Integral Yoga, the community was to develop organically, in accordance with the progressive spiritualisation of its members, and the kind of society that would emerge from this could not be anticipated: "Men must become conscious of their psychic being and organise themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws – that is the ideal."[10]

However, in the early years of Auroville, when she was still alive, The Mother acted as a de facto guru, or charismatic leader, even though she never lived in the community, insisting it should be self-organised. Early members frequently sought her guidance, as evidenced by this section's opening question. By internal accounts, her authority was uncontested;[11] to this day, statements she made about how Auroville should be managed and organised[12] are deployed by current members to lend weight to their proposals and decisions, or their criticisms of others' – so that her charismatic authority is argued to have become "routinized."[13]

While she envisioned "an organisation which is the expression of a higher consciousness working to manifest the truth of the future,"[14] she also anticipated that a makeshift, temporary solution would have to be exercised while the polity matured spiritually towards embodying this. At one point, she suggested a "hierarchical organisation grouped around the most enlightened centre,"[15] similar

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[10] *Words of The Mother – I*, 218.

[11] As noted by participants in a "Create Auroville Together" Auroville community meeting, recorded here: "The Auroville Foundation Act," *Auroville Radio*, Feb 3, 2017, https://www.aurovilleradio.org/the-auroville-foundation-act/.

[12] Compiled in *The Mother on Auroville*. See also "Auroville," in *Words of The Mother – I*, 187–348, and Guigan *Auroville in Mother's Words*.

[13] Stuart Lead "The Routinization of Charisma in a Context of an Inner-Worldly Mystic Orientation" (MA Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1993).

[14] *Words of The Mother – I*, 198.

[15] *The Mother on Auroville*, 70.

to the concept of 'philosopher kings' that Plato proposed in *The Republic*.[16] However, the radical political culture that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s fore-fronted the feminist and anarchist non-hierarchical, collectivist practices of decision-making based on consensus, and like many other intentional communities of this era, this was the form and ethos that was adopted in Auroville.

This ethos remains strong today, even as the community moves towards more hierarchical and representative models of governance – a shift that we will look at in detail in this chapter. This transition is part of a broader phenomenon of formalisation, institutionalisation, and bureaucratisation in the Auroville context, one in which we see the profuse elaboration of policy, structure and process. Weber predicts this for any form of organisation or association as it scales and persists in time.[17] While it is underway in Auroville, and encouraged by some for the clarity it offers, the majority seem to resist and resent it, evidenced by the fact that new policies and processes are constantly being internally challenged and revised. During the time I was carrying out fieldwork alone, this was the case for a number of significant policies – such as the *Code of Conduct* for Auroville's economic units, the new Entry Policy (2017) for the admission and termination of community membership – and the entire Selection Process for Auroville's Working Groups. This dynamic is congruent with something The Mother had insisted on – that there should be nothing fixed, no rules in Auroville, in order to leave space for constant evolution.[18] In Chapter 7 on Auroville's economic governance, we will

[16] See Plato and James Adam, "BOOK VI," in *The Republic of Plato*, *Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 1–73.

[17] Max Weber et al., *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology, Volume 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[18] See *Words of The Mother – I*, 261, 266.

look at how this is enacted in what I theorise as a "subjectively objective" approach to administration.

5.2 A Government-Enabled Anarchy?

It is the community's internal political practices, processes, and forms of organisation, or 'governance,' that are the subject of the entire ethnographic section of this thesis, with this first empirical chapter providing a general introduction and examination of Auroville as polity. I say *internal* because there has always been a point of authority outside of the community exercising a degree of control over it. As was highlighted in the previous section, in the early years of the community The Mother de facto exercised a charismatic form of leadership. Today, Auroville is registered as a Foundation under the Human Resources Department of the Central Government, a structure that includes Indian government appointed boards with advisory power over Auroville. An analysis of Auroville's anarchic nature cannot exclude a consideration of this relationship with the Indian government; its current and historical legal status within India will thus first be examined here.

5.2.1 The Auroville Foundation

In 1968, The Mother established Auroville, registered under the Sri Aurobindo Society, a not-for-profit organisation and research institute that she had founded in 1960. Following her death in 1973, the Sri Aurobindo Society sought to inherit the authority she had exercised over the community, and illegally withheld funds donated to Auroville as part of a bid for power in overseeing its management and development. This led to a court case resulting, in a first instance, in the passing of the *Auroville Emergency Provisions Act (1980)*, in 1980, by the

Government of India.[19] As per the Act, the management of all Auroville assets were temporarily vested in the Central Government, stripping the Sri Aurobindo Society from any power over the community. In 1988, Auroville's status was finalised with the passing of the *Auroville Foundation Act (1988)*, which established Auroville as a Foundation, a statutory body under the auspices of the Human Resources Development Ministry (formerly the Ministry of Education) of India's Central Government.[20]

What authority over the community does the Act afford the Indian government? The Auroville Foundation has three authorities, the International Advisory Council, Governing Board, and Residents' Assembly, together responsible for the "management and further development of Auroville in accordance with its original Charter."[21] The Residents' Assembly (RA) is composed of all adult members of the community and is responsible for all day-to-day management, administration and decision-making. To carry out these responsibilities, it forms and selects a number of "Working Groups" to take up various aspects of community life.[22] The parliamentary debates that led to the passing of the *Auroville Foundation Bill, 1988* evoke the importance of these "autonomous arrangements" for the development of Auroville.[23]

The Governing Board (GB) is composed of Indian citizens appointed by the Central Government (usually connected to the government and familiar with Sri Aurobindo's philosophy), and is vested with the "general superintendence" of the

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[19] See "Organisational history and involvement of Government of India," *Auroville*, last accessed July 2, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/850.

[20] This history is detailed in academic Robert Minor's *The Religious, the Spiritual, and the Secular: Auroville and Secular India*, and Aurovilian Alain Bernard's *Genesis of the Auroville Foundation Act* (Auroville: Auroville Press, 2010).

[21] Preamble of the *Auroville Foundation Act, 1988*, (Rajya Sabha, Parliament of India).

[22] The selection of Working Groups by the Residents Assembly is examined in both this chapter and the subsequent one.

[23] *Auroville Foundation Bill, 1988* (Rajya Sabha, Parliament of India).

Auroville Foundation.[24] The Governing Board meets in Auroville twice a year, and is briefed on pertinent issues by its Secretary, stationed in Auroville, and by the "Working Committee," a body constituted by the Act, consisting of Aurovilians selected by the Auroville Residents' Assembly to liaise with the other official bodies of the Auroville Foundation on behalf of the community. The Working Committee is also mandated to represent the interests of the community and its members in matters dependent on government involvement (for example visa issues, or the planning of a highway through the Auroville area).

While the Governing Board occasionally makes demands of certain Auroville Working Groups or institutions to take up new initiatives or lines of management, my brief and limited insight into these matters[25] is that such pressurising is largely unsuccessful – key reasons for this being lack of familiarity with the complexity of the Auroville context, and with entrenched issues of power within the community, and a lack of resources, most importantly, human resources.

The Governing Board, in turn, is advised by the International Advisory Council (IAC), a body composed of eminent international figures[26] also appointed by the Central Government. The incorporation of an international advisory council is in keeping with The Mother's conception of Auroville as an international township. Such indications were intentionally heeded in the design of the Act, as reported in the parliamentary debates pertaining to its passing: "It is Sri

[24] *Auroville Foundation Act, 1988* section 11.3.

[25] I attended the first of two Governing Board meetings held in Auroville during my field research as an observer, in my role of doctoral researcher. In the second, I was asked to present a conference project, The Bridge, which I co-organised for Auroville's 50th anniversary in February 2018. I was also invited to participate in a meeting called by a couple of Governing Board members related to the use of the SAIIER building.

[26] Past members include reputed academics such as Prof. Amartya Sen, Director-Generals of UNESCO, and members of the Club of Rome. See "The International Advisory Council," Auroville, last updated July 4, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/1212.

Aurobindo and The Mother who provide the vision for Auroville and the proposed Foundation is intended to provide the infrastructure."[27]

The Central Government appoints a "Secretary" of the Auroville Foundation to conduct the legal and financial administration of the latter, under the authority of the Governing Board. While the Auroville Foundation Secretariat at first undertook the management of Auroville's funds and assets in addition to their legal financial administration, the former is now undertaken by an Aurovilian Working Group, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC), formed in 2007 on the request of the Governing Board.

While the Secretary[28] of the Auroville Foundation and its Financial Officer are officially members of the FAMC group they did not attend its meetings, request its notes, or otherwise involve themselves in its decision-making processes during the period in which I was attending these as part of my field research.[29] They do however retain overseeing power, and may make requests of the FAMC to take up an issue that has come to their attention, or counter decisions the group has taken.

Significantly, there is no Indian police force or other form of Indian law enforcement service within Auroville – the community has been free to develop its own safety and security service, and conflict resolution devices.[30] The Auroville Safety and Security Service does however interact with the local police to address offenses perpetrated by non-Aurovilians within the Auroville area.

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[27] *Auroville Foundation Bill, 1988* section 1.

[28] The highest position within the Auroville Foundation Office.

[29] Although I understand that they occasionally attend. Attendance is at the discretion of the Secretary, while a previous officer chose to attend regularly, another declined to attend at all.

[30] See Chaitanya Dalta, "The Constructive Role of Conflict in an Intentional Community: Auroville as a Case-Study" (MSc Thesis, Northeastern University, 2014).

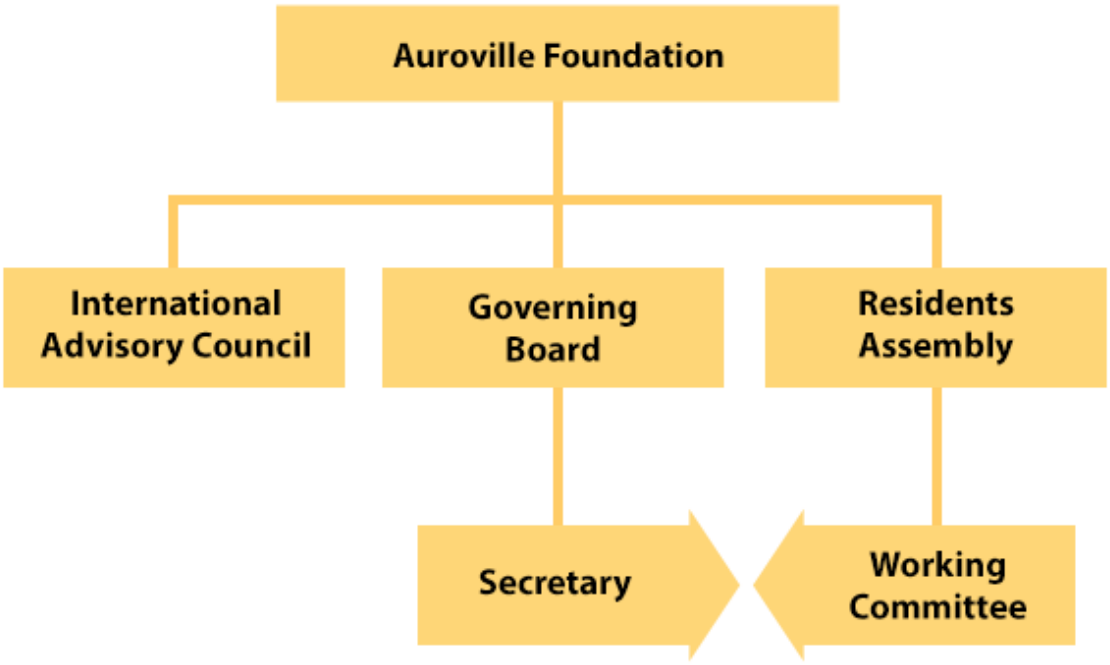

Fig. 14. Legal Structure of the Auroville Foundation.[31]

5.2.2 Divine Intervention? The Passing of the Auroville Foundation Act

The chief architect of the Act, Dr. Kireet Joshi, was a devotee of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo – a civil servant who had joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1956 and later been requested by The Mother to rejoin the Indian government, thereafter acting as her 'instrument.' His position enabled him to secure the first recurring source of funding from the HRD Ministry for Auroville, via the establishment of an educational research institution in the community, the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER), and later to propose the structure of the Auroville Foundation.

Having been close to The Mother, Dr. Joshi had an in-depth understanding of her vision for Auroville, and a commitment to serve its manifestation. Having

[31] "The Auroville Foundation," Auroville, accessed Oct 16, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/572.

been a civil servant, he was also well-aware of the challenges and opportunities inherent in its incorporation into the Indian government. He was the perfect person to design a legal entity that would best safeguard and facilitate the development of Auroville while fitting into the framework of the Indian government. That said, Dr. Joshi did not try to fit Auroville into existing moulds, but designed something unique and out-of-the-box – especially in that it incorporated an international overseeing body (the International Advisory Council), and gave Auroville jurisdiction and decision-making powers over its internal affairs (by establishing the Residents' Assembly).

The fact that such a tailored-to-Auroville Act was passed – unanimously in both Houses of Parliament – is seen by many contemporary Aurovilians as having been facilitated by a higher spiritual power, including but not limited to that of The Mother herself.[32] It strongly contributes to a discourse of the community being an exceptional and unique project that is spiritually chaperoned and protected.[33]

The legal endorsement of the Indian government of the project of an experimental international township predicated on a spiritual utopianism also aligns with a larger discourse that celebrates India as a uniquely spiritually-inclined nation, a notion upheld by Sri Aurobindo and other Indian spiritual leaders[34] who affirm that the role of the Indian nation in the global context is to transmit its spiritual knowledge to serve humanity as a whole:

> India is the guru of the nations, the physician of the human soul in its profounder maladies; she is destined once more to new-mould the life of the world and restore the peace of the human spirit.[35] (Sri Aurobindo).

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[32] "The Auroville Foundation Act," *Auroville Radio*, Feb 3, 2017, last accessed 21 Nov 2018, https://www.aurovilleradio.org/the-auroville-foundation-act/.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Such as Swami Vivekanda and Paramahansa Yogananda.

[35] Sri Aurobindo, "Swaraj and the Coming Anarchy," *Bande Mataram* (March 5, 1908).

> From the spiritual standpoint, India is the leading country in the world. Her mission is to give the example of spirituality.[36] (The Mother).

> This is the ancient land where wisdom made its home before it went into any other country (…) This is the land from whence, like the tidal waves, spirituality and philosophy have again and again rushed out and deluged the world, and this is the land from whence once more such tides must proceed in order to bring life and vigour into the decaying races of mankind.[37] (Swami Vivekanda).

India's Vedic and yogic spirituality was introduced to Western European and Northern American popular culture in the 1960s – notably by music bands such as the Beatles – and in the past few decades, India has arguably emerged as the major spiritual destination of the world. The current Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power since 2014, has actively marketed India as such – creating the "International Yoga Day" holiday, and introducing a "Yoga visa" for visitors to India, for example. Narendra Modi, the current prime minister of India, is famous for his spiritual activities – photos of him meditating in a secluded cave in the Himalayas to seek spiritual communion at the eve of his re-election in May 2019 made headlines and Twitter feeds.[38] It is important to note that while India has a majority of Hindus – whose religion is based on Vedic scripture – it has other long-standing indigenous spiritual and religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, and that these are currently excluded from the national representation of Indian spirituality, as is the spirituality practiced by India's Adivasi (tribal) groups.[39]

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[36] The Mother, *India the Mother* (The Mother's Institute of Research: New Delhi, 1998), 232.

[37] Swami Vivekananda, "The Future of India," *Lectures from Colombo to Almora* (Vyjanati Press: Madras, 1897).

[38] Evangeline Elsa, "Indian PM Modi meditates in a cave, pictures go viral," *Gulf News India*, accessed July 2, 2019, https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/india/indian-pm-modi-meditates-in-a-cave-pictures-go-viral-1.64028532.

[39] Let alone non-indigenous religions practiced by religious minorities in India: Christians, Muslims, Jews and Parsis. For an article on the Hindu nationalist state and India's religious diversity, see Ashutosh Varshney, "India's Watershed Vote: Hindu Nationalism in Power?" *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 4 (2014): 34-45, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2014.0071.

5.2.3 National and Supranational Endorsement of Auroville

How has the Auroville project been perceived and supported by the Indian Government, currently and historically? Several Indian political leaders have paid dignitary visits to the community, each making positive statements on Auroville.[40] The first was Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, in 1969, who was later instrumental in the passing of the *Auroville Emergency Provisions Act, 1980*. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi granted Aurovilians an audience during the lead up to the *Auroville Foundation Act, 1988*, which he ensured would be favourable to Auroville.[41]

Fig. 15. Indian PM Indira Gandhi's first dignitary visit to Auroville, October 6, 1969.[42]

[40] See "Statements of Support from Government of India," *Auroville*, last updated March 12, 2018, https://www.auroville.org/contents/870.

[41] Bernard, *Genesis of the Auroville Foundation Act*

[42] "69.10.06 Indira Gandhi Prime Minister of India's visit," 1969, Photograph, Auroville Archives. Pictured here at the Auroville office in Pondicherry.

During my fieldwork, in February 2018, the country's current prime minister, Narendra Modi, visited the community to mark its 50th anniversary. Following a meditation in the Matrimandir, Auroville's spiritual centre, he gave a speech exhorting the community's ideals and activities over the past five decades, linking these to India's Vedic spiritual tradition.[43] Kiran Bedi, the Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, the closest metropolitan centre to Auroville, joined Modi for his Golden Jubilee visit, and has paid several of her own to Auroville – notably to highlight and promote socially inclusive and ecological practices in the local region, such as wheelchair accessibility and cycling.[44]

Beyond the Indian context, Auroville has also long been recognised and endorsed by UNESCO, featuring in five UNESCO resolutions to date, given the community's alignment with UNESCO's core values – notably of peace and harmony, cultural diversity, lifelong education, and sustainability. [45] This combination of both national and international recognition, and an incorporated status under an Indian government ministry that grants Auroville legal status and protection is significant, especially in light of the history of intentional communities. Most of these communal experiments have dissolved in the face of pressure and prejudice from the surrounding, dominant host society and its

[43] "PM Modi addresses programme to mark Golden Jubilee of Auroville," *Narendra Modi,* https://www.narendramodi.in/pm-modi-addresses-programme-to-mark-golden-jubilee-of-auroville-foundation-539112, accessed July 2, 2019.

[44] "Accessible Auroville Meeting with Puducherry Governor Kiran Bedi," *Auroville*, accessed July 2, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/4238; "Accessible Inclusive Awareness – Let's play with the diversities," *AurovilleRadioTV*, accessed July 2, 2019, https://www.aurovilleradio.org/accessible-inclusive-awareness-lets-play-with-the-diversities/.

[45] "Statements of Support – UNESCO," Auroville, accessed July 2, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/538.

government institutions.[46] Their disbandment was often precipitated by the fact that alternative practices did not fit into existing legal frameworks.

5.2.4 Auroville Foundation Act: Facilitating a government-enabled anarchy

It is thus pertinent to highlight that the Auroville Foundation Act provided a *facilitative* legal framework for the realisation of some of Auroville's key ideals. As previously noted, the tripartite body of the Auroville Foundation allows for the development of an Aurovilian society as decided upon and enacted by an entirely Aurovilian body politic, the Residents' Assembly. This allows for the freedom of experimentation, formulation and reformulation in accordance with the emerging needs and spiritual progress of current residents, as intended by The Mother. The Indian government also grants Aurovilians five-year "Entry" visas, unique in India, which allow foreign members to reside and work within Auroville, and thus realise its aspiration of being an international township.

Furthermore, the legal economic structure of the Auroville Foundation is such that all of its funds and immoveable assets are vested within it, effectively enabling the economic ideal of "no private property," and of non-ownership of the project as specified in the Auroville Charter. This is significant to note because alternative economic practices – based on non-individual and non-capitalist forms – in intentional community contexts and beyond, are among the many that struggle to be legalised; the legal status of cooperatives is a rare example of success in this regard.[47]

In addition to legal restrictions, financial pressure has also historically compromised the viability of other intentional community projects (leading

[46] A recently highlighted example of this is the case of Rajneeshpuram in Oregon, which was the subject of the Netflix documentary series *Wild Wild Country*.

[47] See Johnston Birchall, *The international cooperative movement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

Oneida, for example to restructure as a joint stock company), thus it is important to highlight that the Indian government makes a yearly grant to Auroville for its research and infrastructure. One of the grant's beneficiaries is the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER), which funds much of Auroville's experimental educational institutions and projects. This directly facilitates Auroville realising itself as a site of unending education, one of the key points of its Charter.[48] L'Avenir d'Auroville, Auroville's town planning body, is another beneficiary, receiving annual funding for roads and infrastructure.

Some of Auroville's Working Groups – the Working Committee, Funds and Assets Management Committee and L'Avenir d'Auroville – also receive funding for member stipends and basic expenditures (such as office expenses, and member training). In addition to these recurring grants, community members have been successful in obtaining government funding for specific projects (all allocations of Government of India grants are approved by the Governing Board). A recent example is the residential project "Humanscapes," allocated to Auroville youth, the majority of whom do not have the financial resources to secure their own housing.[49]

The fact that Auroville receives significant funding from the Government of India is celebrated by some community members and associates, and is a cause for concern to others. The fact that this funding comes with its own restrictions aliments the development of certain sectors or aspects of Aurovilian society that may not be congruent with the community's own development priorities, a key example being the funding of buildings that exceed the needs of the current

[48] Suryamayi, "Auroville, a Site of Unending Education," *Auroville Today* no. 359 (June-July 2019), accessed Sep 23, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/4684.

[49] Alan, "Humanscapes," *Auroville Today* no. 340 (Nov 2017), accessed Sep 23, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/4365.

population, which is then compelled to bear the costs of their on-going maintenance.

That said, building projects are proposed by community members, not the Indian Government. In recent decades the community has not undergone a collective process to determine what its funding priorities would be. Budget requests for Government of India grants, or to other international funding bodies, their own specifications aside, thus do not base themselves on a community mandate of development. Typically, they are initially approved in a process internal to Auroville, at the discretion of selection teams of Aurovilians. These teams are normally appointed and overseen by Auroville's Working Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee, or the executives of government funded institutions within Auroville, such as the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) and Bharat Nivas, Auroville's "Pavilion of India."

5.2.5 Alter-Development and the State

Auroville's unique status within the legal framework of the Indian Government allows it to retain autonomy over its internal affairs, enabling it to be self-managing and to experiment with alternative practices, while benefiting from government endorsement and funding. This is especially significant when considering that legal and financial pressure has compromised the viability of other intentional community projects. However, scholars of the community have expressed concerns around the co-optation of the project due to its relational

enmeshment with the Indian government, as well as its embeddedness in a capitalist context.[50]

Is Auroville a government-enabled anarchy? At the very least, its example compels us to consider the role of the state in facilitating alter-development. The two have predominantly been pitted against one another, although recent research points to an alternative assessment. The economist Mariana Mazzucatto highlights the little-known role that governments already play in enabling innovative development, as the critical funders of early-stage research into alternative practices that can eventually reshape entire industries towards the public good.[51]

This stands in contrast to the narrative that the private sector fuels innovation; furthermore, such investment is predicated on financial return, rather than social and environmental benefit – which is the primary objective of government (and NGO) grants to Auroville. Government grants to Auroville are thus, importantly, free of co-optation by the logic of the market and help to buffer the community from its pressures. While a primary source of external funding to Auroville, currently and historically, comes from the Government of India and charitable foundations, not corporations, it is relevant to note that, recently, both national and international corporations have financed projects in Auroville as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility schemes.[52]

The prefigurative scholar Lara Monticelli questions the assumption that the types of alliances Auroville has with government and industry necessarily imply

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[50] Horassius, "'Ethnographie d'une Utopie, l'Exemple de la Communauté Internationale d'Auroville" (MA Thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2013); Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century."

[51] Mariana Mazzucatto, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public Vs. Private Sector Myths* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2013); "Is the Government More Entrepreneurial Than You Think? *Freakonomics Radio*, Sep 5 2018, http://freakonomics.com/podcast/mariana-mazzucato/.

[52] Notably RAMCO in Auroville's education sector, and NLC India Limited in access roads to Auroville's Visitors Centre.

co-optation, and asks instead whether these might be an indicator of the success of a prefigurative project:

> Isn't it exactly when a municipality, a state, a supranational institution or even a multinational corporation starts to recognize […] a 'best practice' and […] to encourage its growth through funds and favourable policies, that prefigurative movements can consider themselves as having succeeded in their goal? Or is this co-optation nullifying their efforts?[53]

Thomas Moore's literary utopia, and many others, are conceived as islands, disconnected from the real world – and criticised for their irrelevance as a result, as were utopian community projects that tried to isolate themselves from the contexts in which they were nonetheless, necessarily embedded. It seems disingenuous, today, to require prefiguratively utopian projects to be of the world, but not to engage with it. There is no utopian formula that can ensure the degree of boundedness required for experimenting with alternatives, and of the enmeshment that seems critical to the sustainability and success of such projects. But a dynamic, reflexive balance – and perhaps even a degree of compromise – between seclusion and engagement seems to be essential for utopian practice as we theorise it today.

5.3 Auroville's Self-Governance

Now that the relationship between Auroville and the Government of India has been elucidated, we turn to the second focus of this chapter, which is Auroville's self-governance and political practice. In this section, I start my examination of Auroville as a polity, beginning by tracing the development and structure of Auroville's administrative apparatus, analysing the political participation of Aurovilians, and assessing the political practice of 'direct democracy' that Auroville currently employs.

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[53] Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century," 513.

A direct democracy is a practice of self-governance in which all members of a collective have equal access to participate in decision-making processes, which are typically based on some form of consensus – and not on voting and representation, as is the case in a representative democracy. Often employed in organising social movements exercising direct action, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Global Justice Movement, the term is used interchangeably with "anarchy," or "democracy without the government."[54] The ethos of equality and fraternity that underscores this horizontal, collective, and consensus-based practice resonates with many contemporary intentional communities, which also practise it in some form. Auroville, being the largest and most complex of these communal experiments, and being of a perennial nature, unlike most social movements, offers a unique case study of this exercise of governance.

5.3.1 Residents' Assembly & Working Groups

We begin by tracing the development of Auroville's administrative apparatus of self-governance, by what is referred to in the Auroville Foundation Act as the "Residents' Assembly," all community members over 18. In its early years, when the community was made up of only a few hundred people, decision-making was undertaken collectively at weekly community meetings – today referred to as "General Meetings"[55] – in which any Aurovilian could bring a topic, and express their resonance or concern with the issues raised to arrive at a consensus. As the community grew and became more complex, groups were formed to take responsibility for specific aspects, a common scaling mechanism in

[54] Graeber, *Direct Action: an Ethnography*, 320.

[55] Previously referred to as "Matrimandir," "Bharat Nivas" or "Pour Tous" Meetings, named after where they were held in various periods, following the development of the community's built environment.

direct democratic forums, by bottom-up processes initiated by community members and agreed upon collectively in General Meetings.

Fig. 16. Auroville Community Meeting (Certitude), 1980.[56]

When Auroville was constituted as a Foundation[57] this existing anarchic structure of self-governance was formalised to a certain extent. As highlighted previously, the *Auroville Foundation Act 1988* defined and mandated a "Residents' Assembly" – the totality of Auroville residents over 18 years of age – with the authority to manage the community's internal affairs. It also decreed the constitution of a "Working Committee" to "assist" it, including representing it when liaising with the government. It is important to note that a precursor to the Working Committee already existed, named the "Co-op," which was responsible for representing Auroville in its interactions with official bodies. As per the *Act*, the

[56] "74 Pour tous meeting," 1980, Photograph, Auroville Archives.

[57] For a detailed account of this transition and the reasons for it, see Minor, *The Religious, the Spiritual, and the Secular*, and for an internal account, see Bernard, *Genesis of the Auroville Foundation Act.*

Working Committee would be chosen by the Residents' Assembly, in a selection process of their design.

Auroville's administrative groups thus vary in their level of officialdom according to whether they are formally mandated by the Auroville Foundation, and therefore officially accountable to its Governing Board, or whether they exist purely within the 'civil society' space of Auroville, which means they answer only to the Residents' Assembly, and can be dissolved or changed at any time. The Working Groups that are directly accountable to the Auroville Foundation are, at present, the Working Committee, the Funds and Assets Management Committee, and Auroville's Town Development Council.

The structure, membership, selection and functioning of even these Working Groups is designed and can be amended by the Residents' Assembly. In 2014, a new, "Participatory Working Group" model was ratified by the community, to be adopted by Auroville's major Working Groups,[58] with an accompanying Selection Process (examined in Chapter 6).[59] Two of these Working Groups recently underwent a restructure, the Funds and Assets Management Committee in 2016, and the Town Development Council in 2017.

[58] The Working Committee, Auroville Council, Town Development Council, and Funds and Assets Management Committee.

[59] See section 4 of this Chapter, and the Study Group on Organisation's *'Participatory Working Groups' & the 3-Day Selection Process of their Members* (March 2016), available online at https://www.auroville.org/contents/3340.

Various types of Administrative Groups in Auroville

(Orange arrows indicate supervisory relationships between Auroville groups)

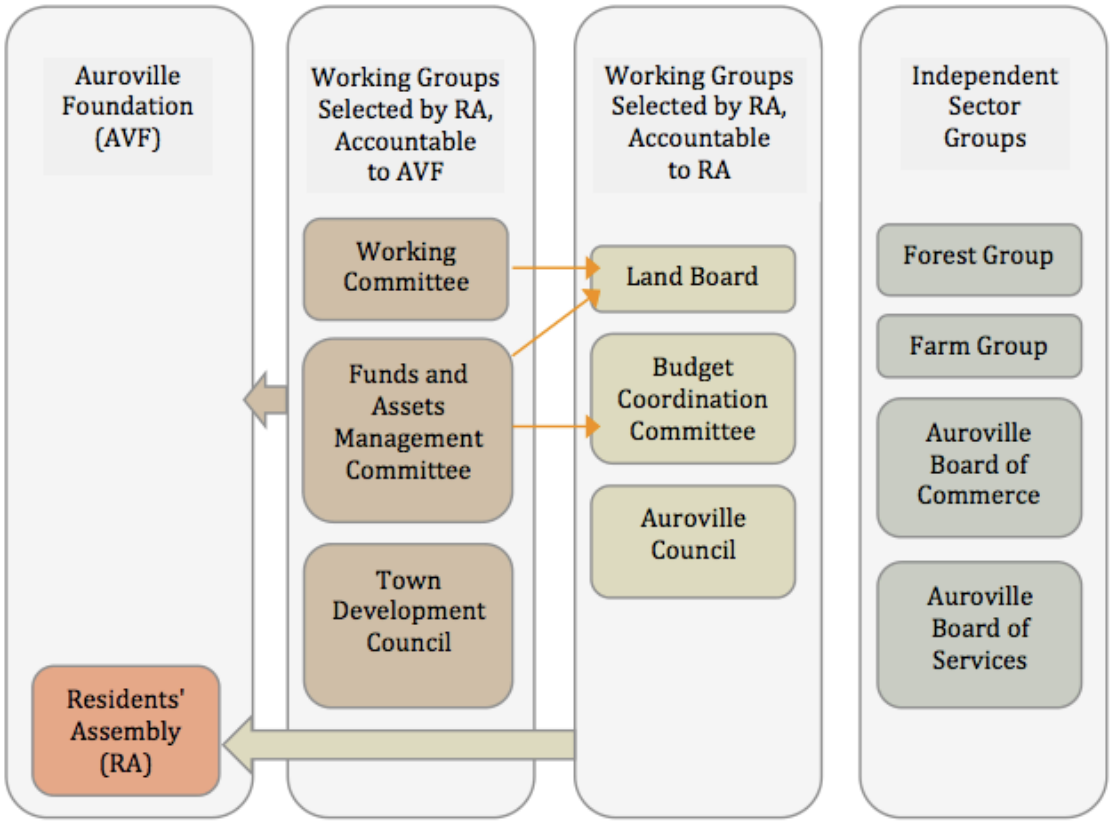

Figure 17. Various types of Administrative Groups in Auroville.

All of Auroville's Working Groups are composed of community members either selected by the community at large in a selection process, or of representatives of various sectors of the Auroville community (such as commerce, or forestry). In the latter case, what I refer to in this thesis as "sector groups", grassroots collectives made up of anyone active within them (for example, all farmers are de facto members of the Farm Group), which take responsibility for the administration of their respective sectors, select their own representatives to Working Groups.

It is important to note that members of Working Groups are not elected representatives to whom Aurovilians transfer their political power. Any major decisions they wish to take on behalf of the community must be ratified in

community-wide General Meetings, the ultimate decision-making forum of the community – thus authority lies not with Working Groups but with the community at large. Working Groups must also regularly publish reports of their meetings, and process any feedback received on their decisions from other community members.

Importantly, Working Groups do not have the exclusive right to make a proposal to the community for ratification at a General Meeting. The Residents' Assembly Service, the organisation and communication platform at the service of the Resident's Assembly, calls these meetings on the request of either Working Groups, or other residents. Often, it is proposals made by informal groups of concerned Aurovilians (which I will refer to as "concern groups") that drive change in the community, rather than the Working Groups officially in charge. In community presentations the latter repeatedly report being bogged down in the "fire-fighting" of addressing pressing everyday issues in the area of community life they are responsible for (such as funds and asset management).

This is a significant phenomenon to note, as it affirms the political potential and responsibilisation of citizens who are empowered to shape their polities. Historically, civilian protest and social movements have driven change in many democratic societies – consider the women's liberation and civil rights movements. However, the demands these made nonetheless had to be accepted by politicians who had the exclusive right to write policy. In Auroville, anyone can design and propose a policy, or the amendment to a policy, and bring it to the community-at-large for ratification, without having to petition a Working Group to adopt it first. A recent example is the Entry Policy, which was amended in 2017 through such a

process. As we will see in Chapter 8, community members have also instigated the provision of cooperative public services, thus performing an "active citizenship."[60]

Working Groups members' terms vary in length from one to five years, and many pursue other roles in the community meanwhile. My mother, for example, has been the executive of the Auroville Visitors' Centre for almost twenty years, and has also served on various Working Groups throughout this period. Only few Aurovilians are the equivalent to 'career' public servants, remaining exclusively engaged as Working Group members – a role that is not necessarily remunerated – shifting from one Working Group to another once their terms come to an end.

The turnover in Working Group membership, along with the magnitude of Working Groups in Auroville, has entailed that a significant number of Aurovilians have served in at least one of these, at some point during their community membership. As a result they have insight into the pertinent, and often perennial issues of the community, and have undergone the exercise of engaging with these. This empowers them to continue to do so beyond their term as Working Group members, by forming part of what I referred to earlier in this section as "concern groups": associations of activist Aurovilians spearheading change in the community. Not infrequently, these politically active individuals are concurrently part of a Working Group.

5.3.2 General Meetings

Despite this rich grassroots political participation in Auroville, the number of people who attend General Meetings or vote – a controversial practice that was adopted relatively recently, and will be addressed further in this section – is

[60] Pier Angelo Mori, "Community and Cooperation: The Evolution of Cooperatives Towards New Models of Citizens' Democratic Participation in Public Services Provision," *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 85, no. 3 (2014): 331.

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relatively small. In the largest General Meetings I attended during my fieldwork, there were approximately 200 people. Incidentally, this is the same number currently required for a community vote to be considered valid, and works out to approximately 10% of the adult Aurovilian population.

Fig. 18. General Meeting at the Unity Pavilion, Auroville.[61]

Many Aurovilians, and scholars of the community, use these figures as defining measures of 'low' political participation of Aurovilians.[62] However, many community members who do not participate in General Meetings, or vote on community-wide matters, are engaged in forums at other scales, more directly related to their areas of interest and activity, and thus cannot be considered politically inactive. For instance, the monthly meetings of the Forest Group, which I sat in on during my fieldwork, were the best-attended of any sector group I knew – but I only ever saw very few Forest Group members in General Meetings.

In my observations and experience, virtually all aspects of community life and development in Auroville are constantly being deliberated and (re)defined, at various scales and in various – and sometimes overlapping – collective processes. These are notoriously time consuming and wearisome, even the staunchest

[61] Marco Saroldi "General Meeting," n.d., Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.
[62] Conversation with Chintan Kella, visiting researcher to Auroville, Dec 30, 2017.

proponents of such direct democratic practice concede that the engagement it requires is trying.[63] The sheer magnitude of such processes occurring in Auroville at any given time is overwhelming; even dedicating myself full-time to doctoral field research, it was impossible to follow each, let alone be an active participant in them. When we consider this degree of routine political engagement that is embedded in everyday life in Auroville, and that this is at least part of the reason why people do not additionally participate in many community-wide processes, the attendance rates of the latter can no longer be considered as an accurate indicator of the political activity of Aurovilians.

That said, it is important not to ignore dissatisfaction with General Meetings and other collective, community-wide decision-making processes – much of which is common to direct and participatory democratic models and experiences worldwide – as a significant deterrent to participation. Specific points of dissatisfaction include the high investment in time, lack of confidence in an actionable outcome, unpleasant interpersonal dynamics, and the challenge of public speaking. The latter is compounded in Auroville's multinational context given that meetings are held in English, which makes them not only difficult to contribute to, but even to comprehend for the community's many non-native speakers. Furthermore, the sense of entitlement to speak is influenced by race and nationality, gender and age, class and caste, which inextricably and invisibly shapes even horizontally-designed assemblies.

Other consensus-decision making forums – notably the Global Justice Movement and Occupy Wall Street – have tried to address some of these challenges with specific facilitation measures and practices to prefigure inclusive, equitable,

[63] Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.

and efficient political forums, with varying levels of success.[64] While adopting some of these in Auroville's collective decision-making processes could be beneficial, a key concern is that the latter do not reflect the spiritualisation we aspire for, and even the best participatory facilitation measures may not succeed in remedying this. Attempts to do so will be examined in the following chapter, on the Selection Process of Auroville's Working Groups. In the next section, we turn to the practice of voting in Auroville, which is also a factor in the dissatisfaction with General Meetings, as these have felt like increasingly disempowered forums since its adoption.

5.3.3 Voting in Auroville

Today, community-at-large ratification requires that a proposal be presented at a General Meeting, in which it is either (exceptionally) accepted as is, or feedback given is to be incorporated as amendments. The proposal is then presented once again for ratification, usually by an online voting process, coordinated by the Residents' Assembly Service. For a 'yes' vote to be considered valid, typically, a quorum of 200 people have to have voted, and at least 80% have to have voted yes. Because decisions are no longer finalised at the meetings themselves, but instead communicated to the community-at-large to vote on, the consensus outcome of General Meetings effectively have "no teeth," as someone recently put it in a collective discussion on decision-making in Auroville.[65]

While voting is a practice that is eschewed by groups practicing consensus decision-making because it neither allows for dialogue, nor ensures outcomes that the vast majority of participants will be satisfied with, a high majority vote is a

[64] Graeber, *The Democracy Project*; Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.
[65] *Auroville Today* 30th Anniversary Gathering, 2 Dec 2018.

common tool.[66] Even this high majority voting practice is controversial in Auroville. Some people find it to be an obvious, simple way to ensure participation of a wider group of community members than those who are able or inclined to attend a General Meeting – indeed participation in such anarchist assemblies is restricted to those who can commit the time required to do so.[67]

Other Aurovilians, however, consider voting to be poor communal decision-making practice, because people who have not been part of a collective process on a particular issue can still vote on it. Furthermore, voting is a fundamentally individual practice, while Auroville is an experiment in collectivity. They maintain that a collective will is not the same as the sum of individual wills, which is what voting is – it matures out of shared experience.

There is an even deeper dimension of this reticence to the summing up of individual wills that underscores both representative and direct democracies, and it is related to the ideal of Auroville as a polity dedicated to the "Divine's will":

> At one time it was said that the Residents' Assembly's fundamental function is to arrive at an agreement. This statement is good, but not sufficient. It is not an instrument of agreement and disagreement. The starting-point is wrong. It is to mature, constantly, the sense of all of us as a collectivity, devoted to the Divine's will.[68]

In this context, what is of paramount importance is not achieving agreements between personal opinions, views, and desires – which Aurovilians see as belonging to the realm of the individual ego. One marking statement I heard an Aurovilian make in a Selection Process for Working Group members was that they should be "at the service of Auroville, and not of Aurovilians."[69] Our extensive use

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[66] Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.
[67] Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.
[68] David C., "How to govern Utopia," *Auroville Today,* no. 301 (2003).
[69] "Thibaut," member of Auroville's Town Development Council, Participatory Working Group Selection Process 2017.

of democratic processes overall is thus felt by many to be a poor exercise in prefiguring the spiritualised society we aspire for.

5.4 Auroville's Working Groups – From A Direct to a Representative Democracy?

In recent years, there has been a marked shift away from a direct democratic, 'spokes-council' model of organisation, in which many Working Groups were composed of members of various sector groups of Auroville, as representatives appointed by the latter, towards more of a *representative democratic model*, in which Working Group members are selected from and by the community at large – in a process that Chapter 6 explores. This section will examine the case of an Auroville Working Group that recently underwent such a community-mandated restructure, to understand the reasons for this, and its repercussions.

5.4.1 From a "Representative" to a "Participatory" Group: The Case of the FAMC

In 2016, the Residents' Assembly voted for the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC), Auroville's overarching economic administration group, to become a "Participatory Working Group." The FAMC had heretofore been a "representative" group, comprised of members of various sector groups of Auroville (such as agriculture, education, commerce, public services) appointed by and accountable to the latter. Now, as a Participatory Working Group, its members were to be selected by and from the community at large; any Aurovilian adult[70] could be selected, regardless of their degree or area of involvement in the

[70] Who had held the status of Aurovilian for at least 5 years.

community. In fact, there are no criteria of eligibility whatsoever in the Selection Process for Participatory Working Groups.

By contrast, the representative Working Group model had ensured that those participating in decision-making were active in what had been identified as a 'stake-holding' field. They were also directly answerable to their sector, and could be recalled and replaced by their sector group at any time, so that decision-making power was held in a collective and not an individual locus. In a Participatory Working Group, members are selected by the community-at large for a term, and have no clearly defined and practicable individualised answerability to a sector group or to the community-at-large.

Transitioning to Participatory Working Groups was, interestingly, effectuated to further democratise and collectivise governance in Auroville, by making it possible for any community member to occupy roles previously reserved for active stakeholders.[71] The use of the term 'participatory' reflects this broader inclusivity. However, with selected members not necessarily being familiar with the ground realities of sectors they administer, Working Groups risk becoming an alienated apparatus of governance, even if their selection process is more communal.

The representative FAMC group that was in place when the process of its reconfiguration was underway had anticipated this shortcoming. When consulted about the shift to a Participatory Working Group, they recommended that there be at least a 50/50 split between representative members appointed by sector groups, and members chosen from and by the community at large in the

[71] As well as mandating the inclusion of a "Resource Pool" of Aurovilians to support Working Group teams. See Study Group on Organisation, *'Participatory Working Groups' & the 3-Day Selection Process of their Members* (March 2016).

Participatory Working Group selection process, because they found that it was key to have representatives of specific sectors present during the decision-making process. The outcome of the process was, nonetheless, to adopt the Participatory Working Group policy of selecting all members to and from the community at large.

Interestingly, some of the members who formed the last representative FAMC were selected for the first participatory FAMC, and were able to compare their experiences of both. They remarked that, with the direct representation of key sectors un-assured, the effectiveness of the team was riddled by gaps of knowledge, information, and perspective. It was now more laborious and time-consuming to arrive at a decision because of missing information pertaining to a specific sector in discussion, and in such situations further deliberation and ensuing decision-making had to be postponed for the required information to be obtained meanwhile.[72] In the following sections, other issues with both the participatory and representative Working Group model will be addressed.

5.4.2 Issues related to Membership in "Participatory" and "Representative" Groups

Another weakness of the Participatory Working Group model, related to membership, which the first participatory FAMC faced under its new configuration, is, ironically, human resources. Because all members at the table were selected by the community at large in a community-ratified process that occurred only once a year, if selected members decided to resign, or travel for an extensive period,[73] or were otherwise incapacitated during their term, they could not be substituted by

[72] Participant-observation at FAMC meetings, September 2017.

[73] Many Aurovilians spend several weeks of the year away from the community in order to visit family abroad or in other parts of India, or to work.

another subgroup member as would have been case in the previous representative Working Group model.

I attended the meetings of both a representative and a participatory Working Group as part of my field research. In the representative group, a member absent for three meetings was replaced by another from his sector group. In the participatory group, there was a period of two weeks in which, due to a combination of resigned and temporarily absent members, the group did not constitute the quorum required for decisions to be taken.

Addressing this very issue, the report of the Land Board Selection Process includes a recommendation that its mandate be amended to include a provision stating that a minimum of two "standby nominees" be chosen to replace any community-selected members who resign mid-term.[74] While this could effectively resolve the issue of resignation of community-selected members – assuming the "standby nominees" may still be available for the role – it does not address the issue of temporary leaves of absence, which can also cripple the effective functioning of a team.

A criticism of membership in the representative Working Group model, however, is that sometimes sector group members take up, or retain, a Working Group post because none of their colleagues is willing to. On one representative Working Group whose meetings I attended during fieldwork, a member wanted to step down for a year, but no one from his sector subgroup was willing to replace him – so he carried on, but was largely disengaged. For another, a sector subgroup sent a representative who was by all accounts – both of the sector group in question, and of the Working Group – unsuitable for the task, as a critique of the

[74] Land Board Selection Committee, *Report of the Land Board Selection Process* (May 21, 2018).

very existence of an overseeing group. This considerably, negatively impacted the team dynamics and functioning of the Working Group, and there seems to have been no effective mechanism by which a representative group could request a problematic member to be replaced if the sector subgroup refused to comply.

Indeed, a criticism of membership in representative groups is that, while sector representatives may be competent in their fields of work in the community, they may not be in community administration. However, the current process for selecting members from the community at large does not address this issue, because there are no qualifying criteria for nominees. It thus provides no safeguard against a scenario in which people who have neither the skills required for such administrative posts, nor a direct connection with ground realities in one or more sectors are selected. While a sector subgroup is likely to know the people who they are selecting or endorsing as a representative – their skill set and ability to work in a team – a selection committee of community members is often faced with selecting people whom they may or may not know personally, and do not necessarily have any experience of working with.

5.4.3 Alternatives to Consider

In the interest of producing scholarship that responds to practice, and not only to academic discourse, I include here a few alternatives to consider for the exercise of re-configuring Auroville's Working Groups, that respond to the concerns that brought the Participatory Working Group model about. Given that the creation of representative groups is a common phenomenon in direct democratic forms of political organisation, these are likely to be translatable into other such contexts.

To address the issue of a recurring cohort of people being posted to (representative) Working Groups, the effort to incorporate new members in governance would perhaps best be undertaken at the sector group level. Few of these have any new active members.[75] This would retain the direct democratic nature of representative Working Groups, which by design is more likely to ensure connection with ground realities, and accountable channels of communication – both of which are key concerns for the functioning of Working Groups, and are not responded to in the Participatory Working Group model.

Another option is to improve on, and multiply, a practice already exercised in some of Auroville's representative Working Groups: members who represent the "community-at-large." Currently, there are no instructions for how such members represent or are accountable to the community. Developing guidelines to yield effective processes for the latter would be worth undertaking. Such defined "community-at-large" roles would also be useful in the context of Participatory Working Groups. While being directly accountable and in communication with sector group members is a built-in feature of the 'representative' group model, avenues and forums for meaningful, consistent, and responsive deliberation between the community and members of 'selected' Working Group teams are lacking.

While the original Participatory Working Group policy[76] mandated that Participatory Working Groups meet the Residents' Assembly quarterly in an open community meeting, this has not occurred in practice. In the recently revised document, these mandated meetings have dropped from quarterly to twice a year

[75] With the notable exception of Auroville's Forest Group, in which a new generation of young members ("stewards") is active.

[76] Study Group on Organisation, *'Participatory Working Groups' & the 3-Day Selection Process of their Members* (March 2016).

– betraying the weakness of its design for ensuring improved communication with and accountability to the broader community.

Many more measures could be envisaged and experimented with for bettering Auroville's participatory democratic practice. These could significantly improve residents' experiences of and participation in community-level decision-making and administration. Such amelioration may be sufficient to address current dissatisfaction with, and disengagement from Auroville's internal governance, and prefigure a satisfactory model of anarchist organising that could be adopted in other contexts. However, the fact that Auroville is already a formidable and long-standing enactment of such a direct and participatory mode of collective organising may also compel us – within and beyond Auroville – to question and imagine beyond, towards something both equitable and efficient, able to avoid burnout, and to ensure inspired, sustained participation. For Aurovilians, this is strongly tied to such processes aspiring towards and concretising harmonious and spiritually evolved individual and collective states, explored in the following chapter.

5.5 Conclusion: Is an Anarchist Polity a Utopia?

Auroville's anarchic political mode is key to its prefiguratively utopian nature, contrasting it from historical utopian communities that were predicated on blueprints. One of the open questions in intentional community research is how contemporary anarchist communities are able to sustain themselves over time.[77] Auroville's legal and economic relationship with the Indian government has significantly contributed to its growth and survival – while enshrining the self-

[77] Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*.

governance of the community.[78] (In Chapter 7, however, we will also explore how this relationship interfered with Auroville's communal economic organisation). Its founding political ideal, which contributes to defining its practice of prefiguring a spiritualised society, is that of a "Divine Anarchy"[79] – one in which the exercise of governance would be flexible and responsive to a spiritual evolution of consciousness, a "divine consciousness."[80] Since its early years, the Auroville community has espoused direct democratic forms of governance, developing forms and processes of political administration that empower participation, consensus-decision-making, and reformulation.

Similar models of anarchist decision-making have been used to organise thousands of participants in direct action social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Global Justice Movement.[81] While the Auroville community is not larger in terms of participants, it is far more all-encompassing than such direct actions. As the largest intentional community in the world, it provides a unique case-study in which to asses the viability and observe the trajectory of such forms of organising, whose limitations in terms of scale, efficiency, equitability, and sustainability have already been raised.[82]

While the township's political administration developed through the classic scaling mechanisms of anarchist models, with the multiplication of representative groups, this horizontal mode has nonetheless resulted in a sense of alienation between Working Groups and the community at large, and a perceived

[78] At the same time, it is important to note that the legalities of the uniquely designed Auroville Foundation engender bureaucratic complexities for Auroville's activities, particularly economic.

[79] *Words of The Mother – I*, 219.

[80] The Mother, *Auroville Charter*, 1968.

[81] See Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*; Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, Maeckelbergh, "Doing is Believing"; Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many*.

[82] Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.

concentration of power among recurring Working Group members. Ironically, in recent years attempts to broaden community-at-large participation in governance, through the Participatory Working Group model, are instigating a transition from a direct to a representative democratic mode of political organisation.

A central concern remains how political practice in Auroville is spiritually prefigurative, engaging of the community's spiritual ideals, both within Working Groups, and in community-wide processes. The following chapter will explore the Selection Process for Auroville's Working Groups, highlighting spiritually prefigurative practices used within it. The upcoming Chapter 7, on Auroville's communal economy, will examine how an Auroville Working Group articulated the community's ideals in its administrative practice.

6 Spirituality and Prefigurative Politics in the Auroville Context

"I'm ready to surrender to The Mother, to the Divine Consciousness – but I find it difficult to surrender to the TDC, the FAMC [Auroville Working Groups] *because they are not connected to the fundamentals."* Auroville Town Development Council (TDC) member, during Auroville's Participatory Working Group Selection Process of 2017.

It's a Thursday evening, and a group of Aurovilians are gathered in the Awareness Through the Body Hall for our weekly Sensory Awareness session. For the first time, our facilitator has chosen to work with the twelve qualities identified by The Mother as essential to embody for an individual and collective spiritual evolution. She begins by reading out the names of each of the qualities, and the description The Mother has given about them, from a set of cards. As she does, I find that one of them particularly resonates with me: "Generosity." She then places each of the cards, face down, on the floor, and asks us to pick one "If one card calls you, then pick that one, and if none of them calls you, then just pick at random," she says. We each pick the card, look at the quality, and then place it back. Mine is "Generosity."

We then proceed to individually exploring embodying each of these qualities through various spontaneous physical forms, our facilitator verbally prompting and guiding us to express outwardly, with our bodies, the quality as we are experiencing it within us. Once we have explored all twelve, she guides us to create a collective shape, each embodying the quality they had originally picked. One by one, we add our bodies and our qualities to complement the growing form. I was very touched watching each person move and place themselves consciously, with depth of presence, care and sincerity, their faces soft and receptive. I still remember the first, one of my peers: her intentional and deliberate walk to the centre of the room, where she placed herself in a kneeling position, arms

extended, embodying "Sincerity." Once we had each joined the form, our facilitator guided us to feel the collective shape, and each of the qualities that we were embodying within it, repeating each of their names.

Fig. 19. Awareness Through the Body session, Auroville.[1]
© 2012 Awareness Through the Body.

Like in so many Awareness Through the Body sessions, I was struck by the depth of interpersonal connection and collective presence that we were able to embody and cultivate with one another in this consciously facilitated space. After the session, I expressed that I often asked myself how we might be able to translate this experience into everyday lives – embody this state when working with one another, for instance. A fellow participant said she had envisioned adopting some Awareness Through the Body practices in our political forums, certain it would have a positive effect on the latter.

[1] "Awareness Through the Body Intensive 2012," 2012, Photograph, Awareness Through the Body digital archive.

Connecting spiritual and political practices is something that I have had many conversations about with others in Auroville. Spiritual practice, however, has been criticised for rendering individuals apolitical, for two main reasons: one is the emphasis on detachment from worldly life, the second is its individual locus, which responsibilises individuals for their experiences of hardship (whether economic, social, or psychological), rather than prompting them to seek out and address the roots of such hardship in structural inequities and social reform.[2]

It is important to note that this critique is based on Buddhist-based contemplative practices, such as mindfulness, and that other academics have offered a counterpoint to this discourse. They highlight the instrumental influence of such contemplative spiritual practices in political engagement, arguing that these can not only trigger a more conscious participation, but also "assist in fighting burnout, political cynicism, and hopelessness."[3] As we shall see in this chapter, in the Auroville context, members' spiritual commitment to the project has sustained many through challenging collective processes.

In her work, political scientist and somatic facilitator Anita Chari differentiates between "contemplative" (i.e. seated mindfulness meditation) and "embodied" spiritual practices (i.e. tai chi; hatha yoga). She highlights the importance of the latter for developing relational capacities, which she argues may give rise to "new political potentials" – echoing the conversations I had in Auroville.[4] I know that if people have had the experience of individual and shared conscious states, this will act as an embodied reference to strive for in collective

[2] Žižek, "From Western Marxism to Western Buddhism."

[3] Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[4] Chari, "The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment."

contexts, including political and decisional forums,[5] because I have personally experienced it as a member of the Auroville community.

I have intentionally drawn from my experiences of shared conscious collective relational states in "Awareness Through the Body" sessions in participating in community decision-making forums. For example, I have used Awareness Through the Body techniques of withdrawing my attention from identification with emotional reactions or mental fixations on a particular issue, and actively centring it within myself, so that I could access a more grounded, harmonious, receptive and expanded state of presence and awareness. This enabled me to re-connect to the objectives of the process at hand, as well as to the others in the room.

Both Anita Chari and James Rowe specifically highlight the inclusion of both contemplative and embodied spiritual practices, such as meditation and yoga, in left social movements such as Occupy Wall Street. Rowe notes that "Embodied practices such as singing and dancing, along with spiritual forms such as prayer and ceremony, have been central to most successful social movements" – even though such practices, regrettably, do not figure in the prefigurative literature on these movements:

> Practices like yoga and meditation were woven throughout Occupy, and were integral to its endurance and impact; they were not a sideshow. This is part of the Occupy story that remains untold, and yet holds vital lessons for the growing body of activists and mind/body practitioners wondering what good mindfulness can do in an unjust world.[6]

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[5] An extrapolation others have made as well, see Karen T. Litfin. "The Contemplative Pause: Insights for Teaching Politics in Turbulent Times," *Journal of Political Science Education* (2018), http://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2018.1512869.

[6] James K. Rowe, "Zen and the art of movement maintenance," *openDemocracy*, March 27, 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/zen-and-art-of-social-movement-maintenance/.

Fig. 20. Meditation at Occupy Wall Street, New York, 2011.[7]

In light of this, and the fact that the literature on prefiguration is largely focussed on alternative organisational and decision-making practices, the current chapter is centred on the spiritualisation of decision-making forums and practices in the Auroville context. Through an examination of the Selection Process for Auroville's Participatory Working groups – whose emergence was examined in the previous chapter of this thesis – I explore the articulation between spirituality and political practice, furthering the debates outlined above, on whether the former is instrumental and strategic for the latter, galvanising and sustaining of conscious political participation.

6.1 Case-Study: Auroville's "Selection Process"

The Selection Process for Auroville's Participatory Working Groups will serve here as the basis for an ethnographic analysis of spiritually prefigurative

[7] Craig Ruttle, "Occupy Wall Street," 2011, *Huffington Post*, accessed Oct 15, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/buddhism-and-occupy-wall-street_b_1136501?slideshow=true#gallery/5bb7ae78e4b0159c28b12c3a/12.

politics. In this first section, I will focus on the use of spiritual prompts and practices throughout the Selection Process, assessing how these articulated with and informed its political aims. In the second, I will examine how spirituality shaped the participation of individuals in the process.

This ethnographic analysis is drawn from two Selection Processes that were held in Auroville in 2017, during my fieldwork period, both of which I attended as a participant member of the community. One was the annual, combined Selection Process for the Working Committee, Funds and Assets Management Committee, and Auroville Council; the other was an additional Selection Process, for the newly mandated Town Development Council (TDC) "Interface" team, the first TDC team to be selected via this participatory process. A dedicated Selection Process was held for the latter in order to familiarise community members with the role of this new team, and because an entire new team needed to be constituted; in the annual Selection Process typically only a few new members are selected to join existing Working Group teams, replacing individuals whose terms have been completed, or who have decided to step down. Because the TDC Selection Process was held first, I refer to it here as "the first Selection Process," and to the annual Selection process as the "second." To preserve the anonymity of individual participants, I exclusively use code names in this chapter.

6.1.1 Attending the Selection Process

Any Aurovilian can nominate themselves or others to take part in the Selection Process, either as "candidates" (those who are willing to take up a Working Group post) or "participants" (people who want to participate in selecting members of the new Working Groups). Those nominated by others are free to accept or decline to participate – but to be selected to a Working Group, one has to

attend the 3-day Selection Process in its entirety. All who attend form part of the Selection Committee, and "participants" are eligible for selection as well as "candidates": any participant could decide, up until the final day of the Selection Process, to put themselves forward as a candidate, and any candidate could choose to withdraw and continue as a participant at any point in the process. The statuses serve to indicate the attendees' initial, and potentially evolving, intentions with regard to their participation in the Selection Process.

Common reasons for declining a nomination are that people are too busy with other work in the community to consider joining a Working Group, or are critical of the structure and practice of governance in Auroville, and cannot envisage themselves working within it. Others are protesting the Selection Process, which they consider to be too time-consuming, laborious, and frustrating. Those who decide to join as participants, beyond wanting to ensure that good teams are selected, are interested in participating in a collective process. Some specifically wish to support the Selection Process spiritually, most commonly through the practice of "Silent Presence Keeping."[8]

All Aurovilians who intend to attend are asked to fill in a profile a couple of months in advance, with their photograph, name, and an answer to the prompt "Why do you want to participate in the Selection Process?" These profiles are then shared with the community at large by the Residents Assembly Service ahead of the Selection Process, to solicit feedback from all residents on any of the attendees. A group formed by the Auroville Council, the "Temporary Feedback Review Committee," reviews all the feedback received and determines whether any of it disqualifies people from participating, based on "The Material Conditions for living

[8] Elaborated on in the upcoming section of this chapter titled "Embodying Spiritually Prefigurative States."

in Auroville,"[9] a set of guidelines originally drafted for the "Entry Process," by which new members join the community. All feedback received on those who do participate in the process is shared during the Selection Process.

I was nominated for several of the Working Groups, and accepted to attend the Selection Process as a participant – in my profile, I stated that I would be doing so as a participant-observer, as part of the field research for my PhD. I do not think I would have considered participating if it were not for my doctoral research. I had no intention of joining a Working Group, and was uninterested in Auroville's administrative sphere overall, with which I had no interaction or engagement. I thus felt no pull to take part in this process, of which I had no understanding, but imagined would not be particularly enriching. I went to both Selection Processes with my mother, who runs Auroville's Visitors Center, and had also been nominated for Working Groups. She had previously served on the Town Development Council, and although she was not considering doing so again, felt a certain responsibility to participate in the Selection Process for the new team, given her experience. She was considering serving on the Funds and Assets Management Committee, having previously served in economic administration as the Auroville Board of Services representative to the Budget Coordination Committee, being strongly committed to realising Auroville's economic ideals. My father, who had served on Working Groups in the past, and had been nominated as a candidate in the second Selection Process, declined to participate given the lengthiness and laboriousness of the process; he was in any case not interested in joining a Working Group.

[9] See Appendix D.

At the second Selection Process, less than 5% of the adult population participated, something that proved to be a significant concern for many in the room, both because the choice of candidates would be small, and because their selection would only be undertaken by a minority of the community at large. Since many on-going and out-going members of Working Groups attended the Selection Process, given their investment in governance, the ratio of Working Group to non-Working Group participants was high, which further exacerbated the sentiment that a clique of people influence governance in Auroville.

In the first Selection Process, the overall ratio of men to women and Indian to non-Indian participants in the room was fairly even, with the only clearly lacking demographic being young adults. I counted five people under the age of 35, including myself. Four of us were women, two of us Indian, and three had previously served on a Working Group. When I asked peers who had been nominated why they had chosen not to attend, they echoed the concerns raised above: the process was too time-consuming, and they could not imagine themselves working within the current administrative culture, due to its excessive emphasis on deliberation rather than practical engagement. When I asked others why they had not signed up to be a "participant" in the process, almost all were oblivious to the fact that it was even taking place, or that one could participate without being a candidate, which points to an overall disengagement with Auroville's political administration.

Nonetheless, both the Selection Processes drew Aurovilians active in different fields within the community, such as farming, forestry, dentistry, architecture, therapy, schooling, conflict resolution, commercial and social enterprise, community services (such as the Housing Service), and the

Matrimandir. These included Jeroen, a Dutch man in his 40s, living in Auroville since 2003, with his wife and 2 children, who had worked with Auroville's farms for a decade, and then set up a social entrepreneurship incubation platform for Tamil Nadu, in affiliation with a nation-wide organisation. Another was Padma, a young woman in her early 30s, born and raised in Auroville to French and German parents. Padma was a former classmate of mine, who had gone on to obtain a Masters in communications for business in France. Recently returned to Auroville, she currently served as secretary for one of the community's Working Groups, was a founding team member of a natural horsemanship centre, and sang with me in the Auroville Choir. Renana, an Indian woman in her 60s, worked in Auroville's animal shelter and was a dedicated Aikido practitioner. She had joined Auroville in 1980, and had first been active in forestry. Arun, a local Tamil in his 40s, had grown up in Auroville, where he had been a school teacher – in a wide range of subjects from Tamil language to theatre – for the past 15 years. Hector, a Catalan man, joined Auroville with his wife in 1997 (now a family of four) where he established a high quality certified (biodynamic, organic, fair trade) coffee roasting enterprise.[10]

6.1.2 The Setting

The Selection Process is hosted at Auroville's "Unity Pavilion," a large building designed for collective events. It consists of a big open hall that fits 250 people and is also used for General Meetings, and another smaller enclosed space, "The Hall of Peace," that is regularly used for collective meditations. On the glass double doors that lead into the main hall were posted the profiles of all those who were attending the Selection Process.

[10] Profiles drawn from the individual's personal presentations during the Selection Process.

Once inside, I soon noticed the beauty of the set-up, there were elegant flower arrangements, small low tables surrounded by cushions on the floor for people to sit on. At a welcome desk, each participant was asked to pick a token, which determined the table you were to sit at, and a bookmark. The tokens were small square laminated photographs of flowers, identified by The Mother's spiritual names for them.[11] The bookmarks were a collection of the twelve qualities of The Mother's symbol: on one side, the name of the quality, on the reverse, a quotation by The Mother on that particular quality. I picked mine at random – the quality "Peace," and the flower message "To Know How to Listen" – and made my way to my designated table, identifiable by corresponding, larger versions of the flower photographs.

Fig. 21: My Token and Bookmark

Fig. 22: The "12 Qualities" Bookmarks

Each table also had folders with the *Auroville Charter*, *To Be a True Aurovilian*, and *A Dream*,[12] and in the Town Development Council Selection Process, documentation of its recent restructure. At my table, I found Alina, a

[11] The Mother gave spiritual names to hundreds of flowers, based on what she perceived to be their divine message or essence.

[12] The three 'reference' documents of Auroville, all written by The Mother. See Appendix.

member of the Auroville Council whom I knew, already seated. “We have to re-look at the Selection Process,” says Alina, before we even started. “Last time it was such a bumpy road, so hard.”

6.2 Prompting Spiritually Prefigurative Political Praxis

6.2.1 Embodying Spiritually Prefigurative States

At 9am on the first day, the facilitation team – a French man in his sixties and two middle-aged Indian women, each Aurovilian – used Tibetan chimes to indicate the beginning of the Selection Process. They stood in silence, for quite a while, a couple of minutes perhaps, until the room fell quiet. Then one of the women started, saying “So the future of Auroville is in silence, when all is contained in silence.” The second followed on with “Let’s all in our own ways try to touch the silence for a minute.” And the third facilitator concluded with “Maybe silence can be there for three days – that’s our idea. That we don’t forget the silence.”

While they were speaking, I found myself triggered by the scripted spiritual tone – something which would emerge as an issue for some participants throughout the process, although others appreciated it – even though the proposition was one that I very much connected with. What followed, however, was a beautiful atmosphere of silence in the room, the kind that is hard to describe in words to an audience that is not accustomed to instances of religious or spiritual silence. It is a silence that is not just the absence of sound, but one of palpable presence. Some people closed their eyes, while others kept them open. It was a precious moment to me, to be able to create and share that atmosphere collectively – while I had often experienced this in Auroville, such as the Awareness Through

the Body session highlighted earlier, I never had in the context of a political, collective-decision making, process.

Reportedly, Occupy Wall Street General Assembly facilitators also used moments of silence and short meditation, and that these "became more common as the occupation continued, and challenges intensified," something which points to the strategic use of such practices.[13] In the remainder of this section, I will highlight the specific role of "Silent Presence Keepers," which were present in the Selection Processes, a spiritually prefigurative counterpart to that of "Vibes-Watchers" in social movement consensus decision-making forums, such as Occupy Wall Street.

"Vibes-watchers" are members of the facilitation team whose role it is to help address unproductive and inequitable process dynamics in assemblies – for example, noting that people are getting tired and frustrated and suggesting a break, pointing out that there has been an unpleasant shift in the tone of the conversation, or highlighting gender or race biases in the involvement of participants.[14] Rather than calling out participants on unhealthy dynamics, "Silent Presence Keepers" act as embodied anchors and reminders of the spiritualisation Aurovilians aspire to.

They sit in Auroville's collective decision-making forums – General Meetings, Working Group meetings, the Selection Process – embodying silence. Silence not as in the absence of sound, but as a spiritual practice of quieting the activity of the individual ego – thoughts, emotional reactions, impulses – in order

[13] Rowe, "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Left Social Movements."

[14] Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.

to connect with and become a channel and anchor for a higher consciousness.[15] This is fundamental to the understanding of what an Aurovilian is called to do, in order to be a conscious citizen in the Auroville context, as is described below by a fellow Aurovilian:

> One feels at times, that a decision could be reached more effectively by simply . . . and in the most profound sense of the word, merge in Silence. Often we are pressed to acknowledge that as Aurovilians we are asked to purge ourselves of our limitations, purifying our intentions, becoming transparent and profoundly reflective . . . this places demands upon the very integrity of what it means to be an Aurovilian.[16] (Roy)

However, it bears noting that the effectiveness of Silent Presence Keeping is contested in Auroville. Members of one Working Group stated that while they could see a personal value for the individual practicing Silent Presence Keeping amongst them, they did not experience a tangible contribution for the group deriving from his presence, and even felt uncomfortable by the attendance of someone who they perceived as entirely disengaged from their process.

While the role of Silent Present-Keeper is now a mandated one for Auroville's Participatory Working Groups, some develop additional ways to support this interiorised dimension. The Auroville Council adopted "The 6 agreements,"[17] a protocol of practices that prompt a more spiritualised state during discussions, such as taking a full breath before speaking, listening and speaking to "the center" – as experienced spiritually –, and empowering anyone to invite silence at any time, used as an opportunity for people to reconnect spiritually. "We put a lot of attention and care in our posture," one Auroville

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[15] For an analysis of the role and practice of silence in Auroville, including "Silent Presence-Keeping," see Vidal, "Manifesting the Invisible."

[16] Roy, "The Passage: on decision-making in Auroville," *Auroville*, accessed March 20, 2019, https://www.auroville.org/contents/859.

[17] These were introduced to the Auroville Council by a visiting collective intelligence researcher, Jean-François Noubel. See "The 6 agreements," *Jean-François Noubel*, accessed Oct 4, 2019, http://noubel.com/the-six-agreements/.

Council member said when the team were presenting themselves at the Selection Process. "We ask ourselves: are we emotionally challenged? Do we have assumptions? Judgments? We put lots of care to create a conscious space."

While some community members applauded the Auroville Council's use of such spiritually conscious practices, others were more critical. Similarly to the observation made about Silence Presence-Keeping, they questioned whether such practices benefited the community at large by translating into more efficient processes and better decisional outcomes, or only the personal well-being of Auroville Council team members. Such doubts about the instrumentality of spiritual practices were expressed throughout the Selection Process.

6.2.2 Prompting Strategic Spirituality

Both Selection Processes included a variety of spirituality-based practices that were used instrumentally to inform participation, and not necessarily, or exclusively, to induce a spiritually centred state. These were always based on material from The Mother: clauses of the Auroville Charter, other statements she had made about Auroville, or the 12 qualities she had defined as essential to living a spiritually evolved life.

In the opening session of the first Selection Process, a facilitator guided us through one such exercise. "Let us imagine that there is something like the Divine Consciousness" – an intentionally ironic rhetorical proposition, given that Auroville is based on this assumption – "… Imagine it is looking at everything we are doing, thinking… everything that we are, individually and collectively. How does the Divine Consciousness want me to be her willing servitor?" The prompt is drawn from the first clause of the Auroville Charter in which The Mother writes that "to live in Auroville, once must be a willing servitor of the divine

consciousness." The facilitator invited us to concentrate on this question, specifically in relationship to our participation in the Selection Process, and then to pick a bookmark of the 12 qualities (also referred to as 'powers') of The Mother, at random. We were to reflect and share our response to this quality at our tables, guided by three questions, displayed on the PowerPoint presentation:

> Q. 1: "Do you feel the Power of the Divine Consciousness has made a good choice?" If Yes,[18] move on to Q.2 and Q.3.
> Q.2: "What does it tell you about your aspiration to participate in the Interface Team?"
> Q. 3: "Can it help you to contribute meaningfully to the Interface Team?"

As we went to pick our cards, I was touched by the quality of the reflective and collective silence. Some people seemed to be genuinely keen to go through this spiritually reflective exercise, others to be just going through with it, and a few protesting by not participating in it. "I don't play card games," said someone at our table, sarcastically. "It's just too much," said the executive of a large commercial unit, to whom I later asked why she had not participated "I was sitting at a table and had to do stuff completely unrelated to the selection – journaling about the qualities. I don't understand why we can't just vote." Those who did participate, however, seemed to be informed in their positionality in the process by the exercise, which was also undertaken in the second Selection Process. The following ethnographic account is drawn from both processes.

I picked "Gratitude," said Colette, a middle-aged woman who had told me earlier she was nervous about being here because she did not want to be selected, having already served on Auroville's Working Groups. "I feel grateful there will be people to do the job," she said with a smile, as we all laughed "– and I can be passive rather than active. I feel more comfortable about being here now." I shared

[18] Notably, there was no mention of an "If No," or a corresponding progression proposed.

that I had picked “Sincerity,” and that I felt relief, because while I had no intention of being selected, I was worried that I might feel called to. “I picked Surrender,” said a young Indian woman who was still in her Newcomer process. “I just closed my eyes and asked the Divine to organise my life the way it wants, because I’m feeling like I already have a lot of commitments.” After we exchanged in our subgroups, one of the facilitators invited anyone who wished to do so to share their experience with the group at large. One woman who was considering joining a team shared that her card was “Aspiration” and that she really felt it was enough to contribute meaningfully. Another said that his card was “Progress,” and he felt “the need to make inner progress for this work, that I am willing to do.” Clearly, there was a strong tendency to re-contextualise participation within a spiritual perspective.

As the Selection Processes progressed, similar exercises were used strategically to inform how participants related to specific areas of work of Auroville’s Working Groups, with mixed responses. A key point of frustration was that spirituality-centred activities were focussed on when concerns pertaining to the design of the process were not satisfactorily addressed. A series of case-study exercises of Town Development Council issues, undertaken on the first day of its dedicated Selection Process, is explored in the following paragraphs to illustrate this emphasis on and tension with spirituality-focussed political practice.

6.3 Spirituality and Participatory Politics

After the initial collective moment of silence, and individual activity of drawing of a quality, the facilitators presented our agenda for the three days of the Selection Process – a mix of individual presentations, subgroup exercises, and introspective work on the first two days, and the team selection on the third day.

One of the facilitators read a quote from The Mother – the opening lines of her address for the founding of Auroville, broadcast live on *All India Radio*, on February 28th 1968; "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."[19] He looked around the room, and said, "This is our common ground – I don't know if anybody disagrees." Nobody responded; the room felt quiet and contemplative. The facilitators then presented our first group exercise: we were to discuss a mock town planning issue at our table, and then share a proposal for it with the room at large.

I was surprised that there was no presentation of the Town Development Council's mandate and scope of work, or of its new structure, which had led to this very Selection Process. The introduction had been exclusively focussed on spiritual positioning. Prior to the Selection Process, I had expected to receive preparatory materials by e-mail, specifically the community-ratified documents outlining the expectations and parameters of the new team. While they were provided on the day, I found that many people in the room were unfamiliar with the material, including the facilitators. I was not the only person in this room who found this concerning: one of the existing TDC members raised his hand, saying "I have been here 10 years – at which point can I express experience? I don't see it in your program," a request which the facilitators didn't respond to right away.

After the exercise, several Aurovilians who had served on the TDC, or had been involved in its restructure, remarked that the Selection Committee needed to be briefed for such an exercise to be worthwhile. "They need to participate with information, not opinion," exhorted an architect who had been on the restructure

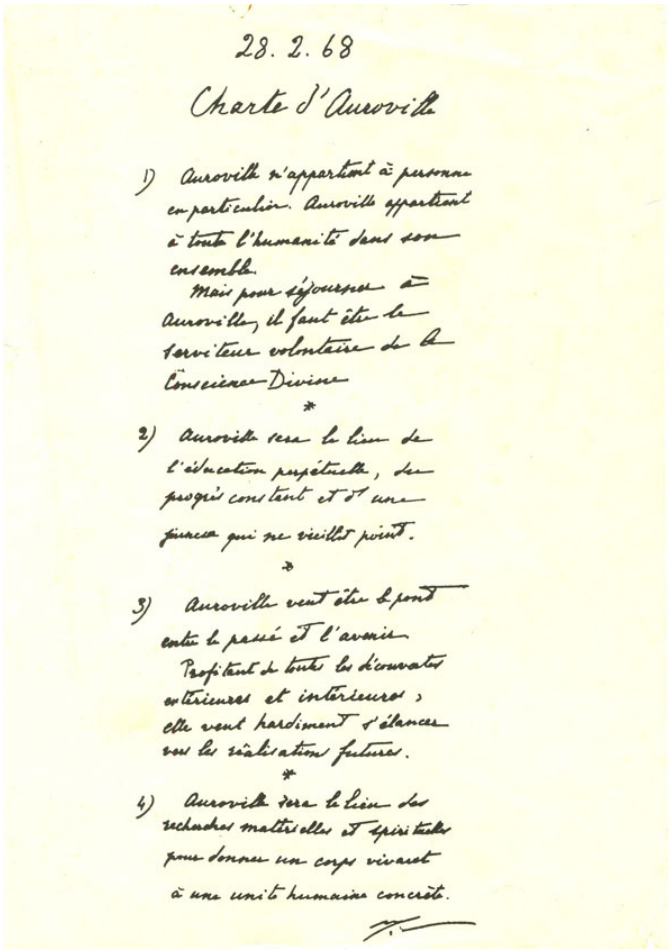
[19] Satprem, *Mother's Agenda, Volume 9* (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1981), 65.

team. “I was doubting if this would be practical, I was even doubting coming,” said a participant who eventually left the process. “I would have liked a presentation from the TDC: targets, difficulties – they know better than any of us! They could have made some practical recommendations.”

A presentation of the Town Development Council had not been programmed, and we continued with spiritualised iterations of the same exercise the facilitators had planned. The facilitators asked each group to revisit their issue, in light of one of The Mother’s quotes: “If the growth of consciousness were considered as the principal goal of life, many difficulties would find their solution.” We were prompted to notice what changed within us, and our perception of the situation. Following a period of individual reflection, we each went on to share our insights within our subgroups. I remember feeling stumped in terms of how fostering a growth of consciousness could be facilitated to address the issue we had been working on. A current member of the Auroville Council sitting at my table said “A change of consciousness can be very small, it doesn’t have to be big . . . A group can commit to do that. It’s not just good or important – it’s necessary. If we don’t, we are doing the same thing as everywhere else.” At another table, I heard someone else say “But there is no reason to just rely on the growth of consciousness, we can also use common sense, we can also work.” These two comments portray the crux of the issue: focussing on the spiritual can either distract from strategic action, or inform, and perhaps, transform it. Attempting the latter is critical to Auroville’s spiritually prefigurative project, and in the next activity, a more practical attempt at infusing Auroville’s ideals into the governance of the community’s issues was proposed – with continued mixed responses and results.

6.3.1 Engaging with the Auroville Charter

"I am a bit shy about proposing the next exercise," says one of the facilitators, his upper body curling back, seemingly withdrawing from us, while the characteristically playful sparkle in his eye, and smile ready to erupt, remained undeterred. "I am afraid that many people will 'grrrrr…'," he says imitating frustrated annoyance. The Charter is projected on the screen. "I cannot resist the temptation to read it out loud," says the facilitator. "I hope you don't mind." Nobody says anything. I find it a bit heavy-handed. I love the Auroville Charter, and I am absolutely for making it central and applicable to all undertakings in Auroville – it is the hint of a proselytising tone that is triggering me.



28. 2. 68

Charte d'Auroville

1) Auroville n'appartient à personne en particulier. Auroville appartient à toute l'humanité dans son ensemble.
Mais pour séjourner à Auroville, il faut être la servitrice volontaire de la Conscience-Divine

*

2) Auroville sera le lieu de l'éducation perpétuelle, du progrès constant et d'une jeunesse qui ne vieillit point.

*

3) Auroville veut être le pont entre le passé et l'avenir.
Profitant de toutes les découvertes extérieures et intérieures, elle veut hardiment s'élancer vers les réalisations futures.

*

4) Auroville sera le lieu des recherches matérielles et spirituelles pour donner un corps vivant à une unité humaine concrète.

Fig. 23: Scan of the original Auroville Charter, hand-written by The Mother.[20]

[20] "The Auroville Charter," *Auroville*, last updated Nov 21, 2018, https://www.auroville.org/contents/1.

After reading the Charter, he poses the prompt for the exercise we are to undertake – "How can the first article of the Charter be a framework to guide the [Town Development Council's] Terms of Reference and Detailed Development Plan?" Within the same breath, he defends the proposed exercise, saying: "As long as we don't make the Charter a practical tool we will not make it." I notice two of the architects of the Terms of Reference looking at each other, eyes wide with frustrated disbelief. "What is this question?" one of them asks, recalcitrantly, belying the perceived futility of such an exercise in light of the on-going lack of information provided on the Terms of Reference (ToR) and Detailed Development Plan (DDP).

The facilitator continues on to explain the exercise; we are to now re-examine the issue we have been working on at our small tables, with the first article of the Charter as a point of reference:

> 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.

The exercise seemed to have varying degrees of success. "In our issues of donations, the Charter is the ideal reference document," is the report from one table working on conditions under which to accept donations to the community. "The first point of the Charter is not applied here!" someone from another table, working on the issue of privately owned land in Auroville's city plan, exclaimed heatedly. "If we don't apply it to <u>US</u> we cannot apply it to the villages," he continued, referring to the fact that we could not ask non-Aurovilians to sell or donate their land to Auroville if community members were not doing so either. This was revelatory of a greater issue with spiritualised governance in Auroville, articulated by another participant, in the second Selection Process: that it could not

be the exclusive responsibility of the Working Groups to ensure that Auroville progressed according to its ideals – all Aurovilians were responsible for acting as conscious citizens in order to create a spiritual polity.

The exercise thus revealed a range of responses to the attempted articulation between the ideals of the Auroville Charter and the governance of the community in practice. Whilst these ideals were able to offer clarity and guidance in some cases, agency was disabled in scenarios in which present situations so contradicted with them that participants struggled to envisage how the Auroville Charter could possibly, practically, be realised within these conditions. Yet, many chose to attend the Selection Processes to address this gap between ideals and ground realities. It is to their motivations that we turn next.

6.4 Spiritual Motivations for Process Participation

A core component of the Selection Process is individual presentations by each of the participants. These are short, only a couple of minutes long for each person, and there is no set format, or questions they have to address. In the processes I attended, some people chose to highlight their professional experience, education, or specific agendas they had, relating to their candidacy for a Working Group. Others simply expressed that they felt a spiritual 'calling' to work on the team, and some had been nominated by others and were curious to see if they might feel called to join a team during the course of the Selection Process. Among the candidates were people who had no previous or even related experience of administration, or expertise in the areas of work of any of the Working Groups, and people who did. This broad divergence in backgrounds and motivations reveals the success of the participatory ideals and accessibility of the Selection Process, and while some participants with no prior relevant experience were sometimes

selected, there was overall dissatisfaction with the lack of a qualified cohort of candidates to choose from.

"I felt something inside that called me forward. I don't know exactly what it is, what I'll bring… I have the ability to learn," was the extent of the individual presentation of one participant who ended up being selected. One of my peers, who had been selected in a previous process, said she had attended it because she was nominated, although when she was first notified of this by the Residents Assembly Service, told them they must have called the wrong person. She said she knew very little about Auroville's structure and administration, but accepted the Working Group membership she was selected for, and learned on the job. Quite a few people shared similar stories during the Selection Processes I attended, expressing that they unexpectedly chose to take up Working Group posts for the experience of serving on one.

Many participants who did have a significant breadth of relevant experience for joining an Auroville Working Group did not highlight this in their presentations, expressing instead their commitment to the community and its ideals, often visibly moved. One such candidate, a woman in her sixties who had served the community in many capacities, simply said "I got nominated, and I care for this community a lot… I come from a point of service… my heart is very strong for this evolving experiment," with humility and sweetness.

Where people specifically raised the ideals of Auroville in their personal presentations, these were often linked to dissatisfaction with how these were articulated in practice in Auroville, or facilitated by a given group. "I am interested in ideals; I am an idealistic man," said one candidate interested in joining the Funds and Assets Management Committee, Vincent, who had been researching and

formulating proposals for economic reform in Auroville. “I propose myself as someone . . . who *really* works on new steps towards alternative economy.” Along the same lines, another participant – an outgoing member of the Auroville Council and executive of one of Auroville’s most successful enterprises – said “I am willing to help the FAMC as a resource person to help it align with our ideals, which I feel is not currently the case.”

During the Town Development Council Selection Process, one candidate – among the few with professional town planning experience – expressed that she was “frustrated and fascinated, again and again,” by the issue of planning in Auroville, which she said was about “collective growth and development to come to a new consciousness, not about building a city as quickly as possible.” Another said she came to Auroville 20 years ago “to build the city,” but was “not interested to build a city that is beautiful with no spirituality”; both comments pointed to the perceived lack of centrality of spiritual development in the current town planning process, and a desire to address it.

Besides ideals, some participants mentioned The Mother as a source of inspiration for their desire or willingness to serve on Auroville’s Working Groups. One candidate for the Town Development Council said their interest was “To serve Mother by developing the City,” referring to the city plan which The Mother had commissioned an architect to design; in her presentation my mother said she was willing to serve on the Funds and Assets Management Council because “the economy Mother wanted to manifest is close to my heart.”

Perhaps contrary to an outsider’s expectations, evoking The Mother can be contentious in the Auroville context, for doing so is sometimes perceived as instrumental to legitimising personal views and agendas. Some hesitate to make

explicit reference to The Mother in public life and governance in Auroville for fear of portraying a fetishized relationship with her, which sits uncomfortably with Auroville's self-understanding of being a 'divine anarchy' that bases itself on non-prescriptive individual and collective spiritual development. This tension came to the fore in the second Selection Process, in response to the use of quotations and recordings of The Mother by the facilitation team, scenes of which are depicted below.

6.5 Relating with Spiritual Legacy: Recordings of The Mother

On Sunday morning, the third and last day of the first Selection Process, one of the facilitators opens a session by reading a quotation of The Mother, from a slide of the PowerPoint presentation: "The future of the earth depends on a change of consciousness." He then turns to us and says, "We know this phrase," with a hint of affected complicity. He presses on the PowerPoint pointer and another line of the quote appears: "So, wake up and collaborate. Blessings." Smiling contentedly, he comments on how straightforward The Mother is, in saying "So, wake up and collaborate," and how she then softens it with "Blessings." I haven't felt as triggered this time, but clearly others have, because I get passed a note from a friend of mine, who's sitting at my table. "Nirmala says we should all say 'Amen' or 'Hallelujah' at the end of this sermon… ☺," the note reads. I smile at what I assume is just a joke, thinking to myself that we are all just exhausted and people's patience is wearing thin.

But when the facilitator next tries to play a recording of The Mother speaking, one of the participants, Loki, promptly walks up and interrupts him, saying something in his ear. I'm surprised, both at the rather bold intervention, but also because the participant is someone I see regularly at the Sri Aurobindo

Ashram in Pondicherry. For this reason, I don't expect him to be uncomfortable at the proposition of listening to The Mother. I too am feeling really uneasy about it, however. "I'm hearing it sounds like Sunday church," says the facilitator. The room is tense. The facilitation team call for a tea break, presumably to confer about what to do next.

When we come back, a second facilitator is ready to play the recording. "But it's going to be a problem for Loki" says the first, out loud to the room. "A problem for a lot of people, actually," another participant announces, in a heavy tone. "Is it such a big deal?" the second facilitator asks, addressing the selection committee at large. Others in the room say, "No, no – go ahead." Some seem genuinely interested in listening to the recording, others just wanting to diffuse the tension. The very short recording is of The Mother's voice, reading out a quotation well-known to Aurovilians: "The world is preparing itself for a big change. Will you help?"[21] Somehow, as soon as The Mother's voice enters the room, the atmosphere shifts, to an intensely concentrated receptivity. "That was the year I arrived: 1970," says an older Aurovilian woman sitting next to me, "This is really significant for me." Not a single person raises a concern, and there is no further collective discussion of either the interruption to, or the experience of listening to the recording. After a quiet pause, we carry on with a consensus-based selection of the final roster of candidates willing to take on a Working Group role.

In the second Selection Process the facilitators project a YouTube video of The Mother, "The Mother talks about total Surrender" – half way through the actual selection, in which it was proving to be very challenging to find consensus

[21] *Collected Works of The Mother*, Vol. 15, *Words of The Mother – III* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003), 180.

on the candidates.[22] The 'video' is actually an audio recording of The Mother speaking, while a transcript scrolls across a still photograph of her. One of the facilitators starts by announcing that the video is 6:30min, and that she will stop at 1:30min, at which point we can ask her to continue it if we would like it to go on. I am guessing that this bid for consent is based on the contentious response to playing a recording of The Mother in the previous Selection Process.

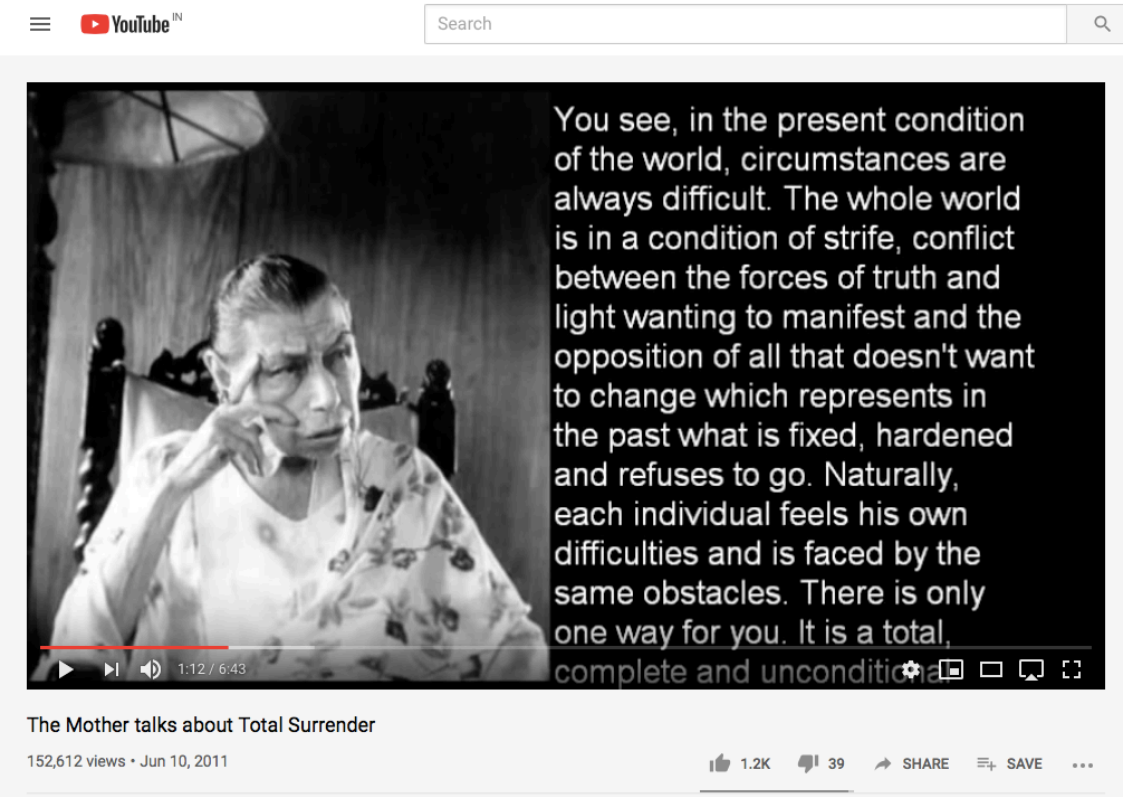


Fig. 24. YouTube video played at 2nd Selection Process, "The Mother talks about Total Surrender."[23]

I am a bit nervous, given this experience, but no one remonstrates. We are not the same group of people as last time, although many are attending both processes. A beautiful, silent receptivity descends upon the room as the video plays. We are all very present, sort of entranced, utterly silent. As the facilitator readies herself to pause the video, at 1:30min, many people speak up

[22] "The Mother talks about total Surrender," *YouTube*, accessed Nov 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PRa3Yx0mME.

[23] "The Mother talks about total Surrender," *YouTube*.

spontaneously, asking her to carry on. At the end, someone sitting next to me says "Thank you." Again, the response is unexpected to me, coming from that person. How we each relate to The Mother is by and large a private experience in the community.

Just like in the first Selection Process, I felt distinctly uneasy before the recording of The Mother was played, but I am moved both by The Mother's message, which I had never heard, and by the collective state of the room as we listen to it all together. I had only ever experienced something similar at the amphitheatre of the Matrimandir (the spiritual centre of Auroville), where a recording of The Mother reading the Auroville Charter is played each year on the anniversary of the community's founding. For a concentrated moment, one can feel a conscious, collective connection with the deeper, spiritual purpose and aspiration of our community. To embody such a shared and spiritually concentrated state in the midst of a collective decision-making process was revelatory, to me, of the already existing spiritualised polity we were attempting to prefigure. Yet, outside of these moments reserved to spirituality, it was difficult to connect with its underlying presence and potential amongst us. As reviewed earlier, attempts at strategically informing the process and its outcomes with spiritual prompting had mixed results. Beyond this, many participants felt frustrated and disheartened because these overlooked, and thus failed to address, issues with the design and facilitation of the process itself. While the YouTube video of The Mother was played during the final consensus-based selection, and seemed to successfully induce a spiritually receptive and centred state, carrying out this selection was challenging due to a lack of consensus on, and clarity of, the process itself, which made it difficult and frustrating. Excerpts of the final

consensus-based selection of candidates, in both Selection Processes, are rendered below to illustrate these challenges, and offer the reader further ethnographic insight into the anarchic praxis of decision-making in Auroville.

6.6 The Consensus Process: Prefiguring Participatory Decision-Making?

As we ready ourselves for consensus-based selection on the third day, those participants who are willing to put themselves forward as candidates at this final stage are invited to stand up. In the second Selection Process, there are barely enough candidates to fill the roles. Distress is palpable in the room. One person suggests that we do not need to fill up all the seats. Someone else announces "even if you can only commit to one year, if you are ready to serve, please stand up." A friend of mine adds "if you feel any pull at all, now is the time," clearly looking in my direction while avoiding looking straight at me. Perhaps she could feel that I was fighting the urge to stand up as well, because I too am alarmed at the lack of people. A participant reads out words from The Mother on faith in Grace.

Concerns as to the number of participants had been raised since the very first day, with a few proposing to adjourn – Guillaume, who I sing with in the Auroville Choir pointing out that "if there are 15 people sick, we don't sing!" The facilitators did not, however, empower the Selection Committee to decide on this, continuing as planned. There were several other significant instances in which individuals raised issues with how the process was unfolding – notably related to the consensus practice being used – and in which the predetermined course was upheld. This lack of ability of participants to determine the agenda frustrated many in the room, and stands in contrast with prefigurative assemblies in which

collective agency is the basis and ideal of the practice of participatory politics.[24] Other participants insisted that the parameters of the Selection Process could not be altered while in course, because these had been mandated by the community-at-large, only a fraction of which was present.

To begin the consensus process, we are divided into 10 tables of 5 people, each group handed a list of candidates and the task to select their ideal team. At the first Selection Process, there is immediate controversy over the list: why does it list **all** participants, and not only candidates – those who are willing to be selected?

"This is what community has ratified as the participatory selection process," a member of the Auroville Council responds. "We need to respect and protect the process. At the end we can evaluate to make this process better. Sorry for the confusion. Obviously you are not going to select someone who is on the list but has said they would not join [a Working Group]."

"Then what's the point of having them on the list?" one of the participants, retorts. "C'est dingue!" ["It's nuts!"]. I also found it absurd, very confusing, and un-conducive to the task at hand. Someone asks about addressing the issue of continuity for the work of the Town Development Council, given that we are selecting a whole new team. One person tells him not to worry, that we may end up selecting someone from a previous team. Someone at our table jokes "the Divine Consciousness will be the continuity."

"The number of people to select also needs to be clarified," another participant points out. "We said a minimum of 6 and maximum of 13. What's the problem?" asks a member of the Auroville Council. "That there are a lot of numbers in between!" a number of people exclaim in disbelief. A few throw out some ideas for

[24] Maeckelbergh, "Doing is Believing."

numbers. There's no way to come to an agreement on the fly, so we begrudgingly move on to the consensus process – with no clear list or number of candidates to select.

We also receive no instructions about consensus – what it is, or how it can be achieved. In the first group I was in, we are unsure about how to proceed. A member of the facilitation team sitting at our table didn't advise. Finally we decide to select an "ideal team" of 6 people individually, then write down how many times given names had been selected to arrive at a group selection – which effectively meant that we were voting, rather than practising consensus. We finish quite quickly, having no discussion or exchange about the candidates. I'm not satisfied with the outcome. There are people on our group list whom I personally disapprove of selecting, obviously reflecting a lack of consensus.

Jumping ship, I walk over to my mother's table, which is right behind me. They are in the midst of working their way down the whole list of participants together when I join in, discussing each potential candidate – their skills, qualities and experience, as well as any concerns people might have about them. In sharing our opinions about each, we were listening and learning from each other. Several changed their minds over a given candidate after hearing others' inputs, and each individual could object to certain candidates being in the final selection, unlike in my first group. In the end, there are 10 people that my second group reaches actual consensus on. We proceed to look over their selection and check for gender balance, which turned out to be 5 women, 5 men, and the ratio of Indian to non-Indian, which also turned out to be 5 and 5. They consider the skills required for the various areas of work of the new TDC team, and whether these are present in the selection. Unlike in the first group, they are selecting a team, not individuals.

Once each subgroup has made their selection, we stick red bindis[25] under the names of people selected, each of which is displayed on boards at the front of the room. How many times an individual has been selected by a subgroup is then added up. I was immediately disappointed – all that work we did on team composition in my second group, and now we are back to selecting on the basis of individuals? The outcome of the first round of the Town Development Council selection was 2 people unanimously selected by each subgroup, and there is a fair amount of contesting as to how to move forward. One person says we should go back to the drawing board, because we need a team, not just individuals. We finally decide to keep the 2 selected candidates, and to do a second round in subgroups to see if we would arrive at consensus for additional members.

In the second Selection Process, not a single person is selected by all 10 tables on the first round, but several are selected by 9 out of 10. One of the facilitators asks whether a 9-out-of-10 can be considered consensus. A lot of people object – including someone who has a 9-out-of-10 selection – upholding the need for perfect consensus. Others try to challenge that, saying consensus is not a 100% vote. What kind of consensus we were intending to practise had never been defined – unlike in some of the most widely known, successful examples of assemblies practising consensus-based decision-making, in which the type and process of consensus is predetermined. While many participants feel that reaching a 10 for everyone will be difficult, most want to sit in a second round, in which we will merge two subgroups, to see what comes from it. Again, there was no instruction as to how to proceed – we are just exhorted by the facilitators not to vote unless we were not getting anywhere with consensus.

[25] The dots Indian women place on the centre of their forehead.

Although the top 2 candidates were the same for the first and second round, the degree of consensus on each candidate had lowered in the second. We should be gaining more cohesion on each round, not less. Someone tries to explain that there is a difference between "consensus" and "consent," that we may not have consensus on selecting the candidates, but we may consent to their being selected nonetheless, pointing to the use of vetoing in subgroups. "Mother said Surrender in the video that was played earlier," he points out. The use of veto is utterly disabling for a consensus process, and for this reason, anarchist groups that use consensus-based decision-making define criteria for a veto to be considered valid, notably, that the decision being vetoed must demonstrably violate the core ideals of the assembly.[26] There was no discussion about the practice of vetoing in the Selection Process whatsoever.

We break for lunch, and when we return, the facilitators play the YouTube video of The Mother described above. They then suggest that we look at the results of the first two rounds, and see if we can arrive at a decision. We debate whether to undertake a third round, and I am pretty much despairing at this point – what is a third round of the same process with the same names going to achieve? Someone on the facilitation team is clearly beginning to despair as well, and starts saying that we are not able to practice consensus. I think it's an unfair statement: we are in a tough situation because of low attendance and the fact that consensus decision-making has not been explained clearly. We are not being offered clear guidance or tools to undertake this selection. The recording of The Mother provided a successful opportunity to resource ourselves collectively, but the inconsistencies of the process have not been resolved. Another participant asks the

[26] Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.

facilitators to tell us how to proceed instead of asking us how to.

In a rare breach, one of the Silent Presence Keepers speaks. In a quiet, breathy tone she says: "I would like to invite us to reflect on who is doing 'the work'" – implying that it is a higher power. "Abigail," says my friend Anima, who is at this point lying down on the floor, referring to an out-going member that many wish they could re-select, but is ineligible due to lack of clarity and flexibility with the process. "Have enough people participated for us to get the persons into the Working Groups that we are ready to say yes to?" someone asks, again raising the issue of low participation. I call for a tea break. It's already 3PM – we were scheduled to finish to 1PM. I want to do this, but I'm exhausted. "Yes, please!" say others.

When we return, the facilitators suggest we split into two big groups for a third round, explaining that we are now looking for consensus "or strong agreement," defined in the mandate for the Selection Process[27] as a 2/3 vote. In my group, we eventually arrive at a 2/3 agreement on two candidates, and a 2/3 non-objection on a third. We decide to call that a "weak agreement," and submit it to the facilitation team. The other group has arrived at the same conclusion. It's now 5pm. It's been an arduous process, and I later heard from people observing that they found it impressive that we stuck it through. But I wonder whether it had really been necessary – the final selection for all three groups was identical to the results of the first round. Had the following ones helped us reach a deeper consensus, or were they the unnecessarily onerous product of ineffectual process design?

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[27] Study Group on Organisation, *'Participatory Working Groups' & the 3-Day Selection Process of their Members*.

6.7 Conclusion: Spiritual Practice and Political Praxis

In examining spiritual practices enacted in the context of a collective decision-making process in Auroville, this chapter contributes to scholarship on the significance of such practices for prefigurative politics,[28] and to an understanding of how Aurovilians attempt to prefigure a spiritualised society within their political praxis. Ethnographic analysis of Auroville's Selection Process reveals the integration of two, sometimes interrelated, categories of spiritual activities. The first includes practices that induce the embodiment of spiritually-centred states, such as that of "Silent Presence Keeping," or listening to spiritual recordings of The Mother. The second consists of exercises that utilise spirituality strategically, to inform perceptions, decisions and outcomes. Both were openly contested in the course of the two Selection Processes I attended. Whereas some Aurovilians welcome and encourage the inclusion of explicitly spiritual practices in such forums, there was significant doubt, criticism and even objection to this, which seems to have been due to two key reasons.

One is that these practices did not seem to be relevant to the task at hand, a sentiment that was largely fomented by the lack of practical and strategic guidance and information, which exacerbated the casting of spiritually-focused activities as disconnected from ground realities. Beyond this, the very facilitation of spiritual activities were problematic for some, because it was perceived as imposing certain ways of relating to Auroville's spiritual legacy – notably, quotations and recordings of The Mother – that went against the individually-defined exploration it upholds. Both activities that sought to induce spiritually-centred states, and ones that

[28] See Chari, "The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment"; Rowe, "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Left Social Movements"; Rowe, "Zen and the art of movement maintenance."

sought to strategically influence various aspects of the process did have some level of success, however, and the very participation and candidature of Aurovilians in the Selection Process was significantly linked to a spiritually-informed "calling."

The overall account of the Selection Process yields insights into the challenges and opportunities of participatory political praxis – such as, on the one hand, its time consuming nature, and the difficulty of finding consensus, and on the other, the catalysing of individuals' political engagement, and bonding experiences of collective dedication – adding to an empirical record dominated by that of left social movements, currently engaged in exploring these tensions.[29] Regarding the concerns raised by Aurovilians related to their own Selection Process, a review (in which I initially participated) was undertaken shortly after the two described in this chapter were completed. An amended framework has since been ratified by the community-at-large, but further discussions regarding the selection of candidates for Working Groups is on-going at the time of writing.[30]

The following chapter will explore another aspect of spiritually prefigurative politics in the Auroville context – how the spiritually-inspired economic ideals of Auroville feature in the administration of the community, specifically in the context of one of its economic Working Groups.

[29] See Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.
[30] October 2019.

7 Auroville's Communal Economy: Ideals, realities, and (d?)evolution

"*[I]t is questions . . . of the proper organisation and administration of the economic life of the society which are preparing the revolutions of the future*."[1] Sri Aurobindo.

It was clear from the inception of Auroville that its economic organisation would be critical for prefiguring a spiritualised society. This grounding of a utopian project in the material conditions of life is characteristic of what Marxist utopian scholars define as "real"[2] or "concrete"[3] utopias. To this day, the topic of how to prefigure such an "Auroville economy," as Aurovilians refer to it, is alive – a source of both aspiration and frustration, wrought with challenges.

This chapter traces the emergence and evolution of Auroville's communal economic framework, institutions and policies, and how the community's founding economic ideals have and continue to galvanise, underpin and inform these. In so doing so it necessarily explores the on-going challenge of competing visions and approaches to economic administration in Auroville, and both legal and financial challenges, for fulfilling its economic ideals, reflecting the reflexively "critical"[4] nature of prefigurative utopian practice in Auroville.

The first section of this chapter explores the roots of Auroville's economic organisation in that of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and the founding economic ideals for Auroville, drawing parallels with Marxist economic ideology. The second investigates the early history of Auroville's economic organisation, and highlights the critical departure from this first form, as the community dissociated from the

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[1] Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 25, *The Human Cycle* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), 449.

[2] Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

[3] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 146.

[4] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10.

Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The third section considers the erosional effect of recently introduced economic policies on the communal character and administration of Auroville's central fund, whose reflexive response to deploying these I theorise as "subjectively objective" – pertinent in the context of increased bureaucratisation in Auroville. In the fourth, I appraise the design and administration of Auroville's member stipends as an attempt to balance individual and collective forms of provisioning in light of the community's socio-economic ideals.

Empirically, this chapter contributes a significant case-study of alternative and prefigurative economic organisation, particularly relevant for practices of participatory budgeting and non-monetary forms of provision, universal basic services and basic income policy programmes. In capturing the historical development of our communal economic administration, it also consists of an important piece of community research for Aurovilians. Those who were not early community members are, overwhelmingly, unfamiliar with this history, and many are critical of our present economic set-up with little awareness of the challenges faced in establishing the stage of prefiguration we have arrived at today. The historical aspect of this work thus promises to increase understanding of these, while the autoethnographic mode I employ, which reveals the on-going efforts and trials faced by fellow community members in attempting to embed our ideals into practice, has been known to achieve increased sensitivity and understanding within groups.[5] I hope this will be an outcome of this research.

[5] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, 54.

7.1 Sri Aurobindo Ashram: The Prototype for Auroville's Economic Organisation

Auroville did not start with a blank slate in terms of its economic imaginary – The Mother had already created a unique economic unit out of the Sri Aurobindo ashram in Pondicherry, in which she prefigured a model for economic organisation congruent with the ideals of spiritualised society of Integral Yoga, as well as spiritualised approaches to economic activity. This experience formed the basis of her economic vision for Auroville, and was instrumental in the formulation of the Auroville economy, continuing to inform its development to this day.

Unlike other ashrams, in which members primarily engage in meditation, devotional practices, the study of sacred scripture, or acts of charitable service – and which rely almost exclusively on donations for their subsistence – under The Mother's direction, members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram developed and managed numerous enterprises as "departments" of the ashram. These include wood and steel workshops (Harpagon Workshop), handmade paper and incense factories (The Handmade Paper Factory, Auroshikha), an interior design and furniture firm (Auroform and Aurofurn), a printing press, an Ayurvedic clinic, and a cosmetics laboratory and shop (Laboratoire Senteurs and Fleurs en Flacon).[6] Most were founded in Pondicherry the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, and are still in operation today, recognizable throughout the city by their "ashram grey" wall exteriors (and the display of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's symbols in the signage, as well as photographs in the interiors, although the latter are also used by non-ashramite shop-owners who are nonetheless devotees). They were founded based on the

[6] See "Ashram Departments," *MiraAura*, accessed July 20, 2018, http://www.miraura.org/aa/as/depts.html, and "Departments of the Ashram," *Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, accessed July 20, 2018, http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/ashram/saa/departments.php.

skills and interests of ashramites, whose pursuit The Mother encouraged as a form of Karma Yoga[7] – of work according to one's nature and as an offering to the Divine.

Income generated from these enterprises sustains the ashram and its members,[8] each of whom work in one of the Ashram's "departments," which also include free services for ashramites and ashram life. Ashramites working in any "department," whether a service or a business, do not derive a direct monetary income from their work, but are housed, fed and cared for by the ashram, receiving a monthly bundle of basic commodities (i.e. clothing, toiletries, and pocket money) called "Prosperity,"[9] and can engage in any of the numerous complimentary educational, artistic, cultural and sportive activities organised by the ashram.

7.1.1 "Concrete Utopia": The Prefigurative Rationale for Auroville's Economy

The economic organisation of the Ashram is a seed-form of the one that The Mother seemed to envisage for Auroville. Clearly, she considered that a new form of economic organisation was necessary to facilitate the spiritual and material emancipation of individuals, and relationships of solidarity between them, in order to create a conscious, harmonious society. The Mother never comprehensively defined how Auroville should function – its premise was to be a spiritually prefigurative experiment in conscious evolution, and forms of collective organisation would emerge out of this process, and continue to develop alongside it. They could not be anticipated and should not be prescribed, on the contrary,

[7] The Yoga of Action, one of the three main yoga "margas" or paths of yoga.
[8] Although not exclusively; the ashram also receives donations.
[9] "The Sri Aurobindo Ashram – Organisation," *Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, accessed July 20, 2018, http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/ashram/saa/organisation.php.

space for them to manifest, unfettered, should be safeguarded. For this reason The Mother insisted on there being no fixed rules in Auroville,[10] and that its organisation "must be flexible and progressive."[11]

Interestingly, while Marx offered an insightful critique of capitalism, he did not detail how a communist system would function, by virtue of the same reasoning that The Mother did not for Auroville: one could not anticipate how a society with a heightened level of collective consciousness (the communist project), or a heightened collective level of consciousness (the Auroville project) would choose to do so. The point was not to predetermine and prescribe how a future society of emancipated individuals would organise, but for it to develop in tandem with its members. This is consistent with the Marxist utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch's insistence that "utopian" does not describe a perfect and fixed state, but a dynamic function, whose role it is to reach into the "Novum" – the entirely new – informed by a potentiality latent in the present.[12] His redefinition enables us to recognise an alternative utopian rationale in the refusal to prescribe new societies, one that stands in direct contrast to the 'blueprint' approach of the utopian social theorists that were Marx's contemporaries,[13] and other utopian thinkers before them, as early as Plato.

Marx and Engels condemned these abstract and theoretical utopias for not being grounded in reality, for not taking into account the material conditions of the time, and for therefore being unrealistic and futile – a common criticism of

[10] See *Words of The Mother – I*, 261, 266.
[11] *The Mother on Auroville*, 71.
[12] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 146.
[13] Notably Etienne Cabet, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier.

utopianism.[14] By contrast, both Marx and The Mother focussed on creating the catalytic conditions for the societies they envisioned to be able to develop. While Marx himself would have shuddered to think of the communist project being referred to as utopian, due its contemporary conceptualisation – the same reason Aurovilians cringe at our community being referred to as a 'utopia' – Marxist scholars have since theorised "concrete"[15] and documented "real"[16] utopias – prefigurative projects that exist within the limitations and potentialities of the present.

The fact that The Mother showed a keen interest in economic organisation, both at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and for Auroville, demonstrates the importance she lent to grounding these prefigurative experiments in spiritualised society in material conditions, as "real" and "concrete" utopias. Economy is an area in which she gave not only broad directives for Auroville (the three founding texts of the community, the *Auroville Charter*, *A Dream*,[17] and *To Be A True Aurovilian* all include elements of her economic ideals for the township) but also elements of specific arrangements.[18] These would not only serve to concretise the project materially, but also to facilitate the spiritual evolution of consciousness that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother perceived was already underway; this "anticipatory" quality of reaching for the "Not-Yet-Become" while rooted in the present

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[14] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism," in *Manifesto of the Community Party* (1848); Friedrich Engels, "The Development of Utopian Socialism," in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880); see also Roger Paden, "Marx's Critique of the Utopian Socialists," *Utopian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2002): 67 - 91, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20718467.

[15] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 146.

[16] See Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

[17] Written in 1954, before Auroville was founded, it makes reference to the Ashram, but is prefigurative of what would emerge as the Auroville project.

[18] It is important to note that these were only ever offered in response to questions from ashramites and early Aurovilians, not part of a blueprinting exercise. These are recorded in "Auroville," in *Words of The Mother – I*, 187 - 348. For others compilation of her statements on Auroville, see *The Mother on Auroville,* and Guigan, *Auroville in Mother's Words.*

characteristic of Bloch's conception of "concrete" utopianism.[19] It is to these economic ideals that we turn next.

7.1.2 Economic Ideals for Auroville

The broad-strokes principles which can be gleaned from The Mother's various statements on the topic are that Auroville's economy should be communal, with no private property and no exchange of money between community members, each of whom would contribute to the collective – in one of three ways, "work, kind or money"[20] – and whose basic needs would, in turn, be provided for by the community. Just like the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Auroville would develop enterprises to finance the project.[21]

These guidelines had as their objectives not only to assure a socio-economic organisation that would foster solidarity among community members, they would also support the spiritual evolution of individuals. The absence of private property in Auroville would assist in compelling individuals to seek inspiration and reward for their work and action elsewhere than in worldly gains and satisfaction, in *A Dream*, The Mother describes "a place where the needs of the spirit and the concern for progress would take precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the search for pleasure and material enjoyment."[22] Out of the three ways Aurovilians would contribute economically to the community (work, kind, or money), *work* was the form which The Mother described as necessary for their

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[19] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 146.

[20] *Words of The Mother – I*, 261. "Kind" here meant in the sense of material offerings.

[21] See "30 December 1967," in *Words of The Mother – I*, 261 – 67; "Industry, Commerce, Money and Economy," *Auroville*, last updated Nov 12, 2017, https://www.auroville.org/contents/2825.

[22] The Mother, *A Dream*.

own "inner discovery,"[23] for it would provide a field of action in which people could discover and develop their own potentialities.

For Aurovilians to be able to choose work best suited for this personal growth, it had to be divorced from the necessity of earning a living, which is why she envisioned a community in which the basic needs of the members would be provided for collectively. In *A Dream*, The Mother describes a society in which "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." There are obvious parallels here with the argument for Universal Basic Income, which proposes that all citizens of a nation receive an unconditional stipend, arguing that this would enable many individuals to engage in (more) meaningful work, something that would benefit humanity as a whole.[24]

Having a system of collective provisioning would not only ensure that the material conditions for this spiritualisation of work would be assured, it would also create economic conditions in which cooperative human relationships could flourish. By supplanting transactions (be these monetized or accounted for through any alternative form of market-based exchange) *between* Aurovilians, free interactions – free in both senses of the term – could flourish in the community. The Mother envisioned there being no money in Auroville's internal economy,[25] by which she almost undoubtedly meant no form of market-based exchange within the community. This would serve to enable individuals to thrive in society

[23] The Mother, *To Be A True Aurovilian*, 1971.

[24] See Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*; Rutger Bregman, *Utopia for Realists: The Case for a Universal Basic Income, Open Borders and a 15-hour Workweek* (Netherlands: The Correspondent, 2016).

[25] See "Industry, Commerce, Money and Economy," *Auroville*, last updated Nov 12, 2017, https://www.auroville.org/contents/2825.

unrestricted by economic barriers *and* by the pernicious effects on human relationships that result from (often unequal) exchanges conditioned by the market.[26] This rationale echoes that of Marx, for whom a key concern was the alienation and competition that arises between people in capitalist societies, in which individuals are not organised as a community (their work not contributing to the community as a whole, nor benefitting them as a member of the community, but instead favouring a bourgeois class), and "conflicts with the ideal of solidarity with other human beings."[27] In *A Dream*, The Mother imagines

> Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, would be equally 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 or financial position… 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.[28]

Sri Aurobindo previously wrote:

> The aim of its [a spiritualised society] economics would be not to create a huge engine of production, whether of the competitive or the cooperative kind, but to give men – not only to some but to all men in his highest possible measure – the joy of work according to their own nature and free leisure to grow inwardly, as well as simply a rich and beautiful life for all."[29]

The Mother was clearly aware of the communist project, and recognized the parallels between it and the principles of ideal socio-economic organisation she began to apply in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and further envisioned for Auroville, which she said constituted "a sort of adaptation of the communist system."[30] She specified that it would be an adaptation because it would eschew what she called the "spirit of levelling",[31] a one-size-fits-all system which left no room for diversity in the relationship between the individual and the collective.

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[26] Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, 79.

[27] David Haberman and Leslie Stevenson, *Ten Theories of Human Nature,* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 132.

[28] The Mother, *A Dream*.

[29] Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, 256.

[30] *The Mother on Auroville*, 24.

[31] *The Mother on Auroville*, 23.

She was very clear that each person residing in Auroville would participate in the collective, but they would do so according to their capacities; their participation was not something to be "calculated," and the basic needs of each were to be met, but not "according to ideas of rights or equality."[32]

This is in fact what Marx had foreseen as the future of communism, captured in the iconic idiom "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."[33] Despite the intention explicit in this statement, that the individual's capacity to participate and degree of need would be the decisive lynchpin around which the collective would be organised, early communist states such as the Soviet Union established command economies in which what The Mother refers to as 'levelling' was the norm. Auroville too has been challenged by the project of institutionalising flexible systems, of organising individuals into a collective without standardising participation and exchange, and the remainder of this section will explore this in detail.

7.2 Collective Provisioning: Early Years and Rupture

In the early years of the community, when Auroville was still operating under the aegis of the Sri Aurobindo Society,[34] Aurovilians each received the "Prosperity" bundle from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. This constituted a basic modicum of support that was the same for everyone, but individuals could make requests for additional items, and families of course were awarded additional amounts according to the number of their children. The first collective provisioning operation of the Auroville community was established in 1974 on

[32] *The Mother on Auroville*, 23.

[33] Haberman and Stevenson, *Ten Theories of Human Nature,* 136.

[34] A not-for-profit institution The Mother founded in 1960. She was its president until her passing in 1973, after which the SAS and the Auroville community's relationship became challenging, ultimately resulting in government intervention and the establishment of Auroville as a foundation independent from the SAS.

the suggestion of a community member, Claire Fanning, who wrote to The Mother in 1972, concerned with the existing circulation of money in Auroville and expressing the need for a "proper channel": "If Auroville is to function fluently for need and demand without the internal exchange of monies perhaps it is time to create a 'proper channel'."[35] The Mother approved of the idea, offered the name "For All/Pour Tous," and the Sri Aurobindo Society funded the service.

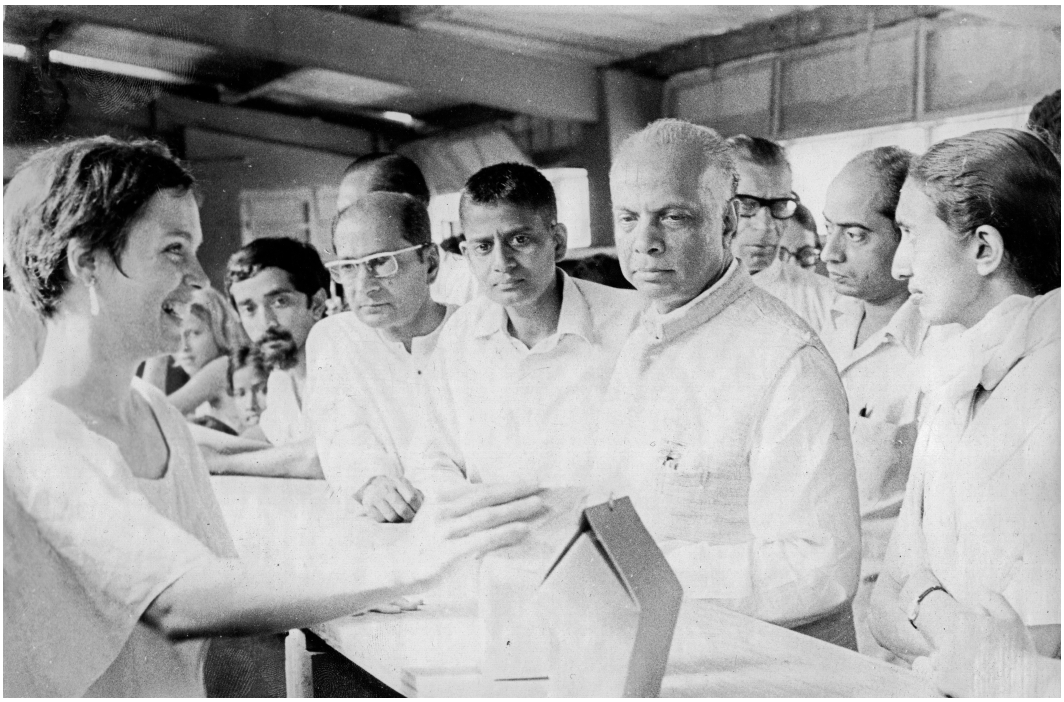

Fig. 25. Inauguration of the Pour Tous building, Feb 28, 1974.[36]

Aurovilians managing Pour Tous supplemented food grown and products made by the community with purchased goods from Ashram Departments and the Pondicherry market. These food and sundry items were distributed to all Aurovilians via a weekly basket delivery service along the same lines of Prosperity: equal shares, with exceptions made where needed. There was no exchange of money, as Aurovilians did not directly receive the

[35] Clare Fanning, "For All/Pour Tous & the Early Years of Its Economic Development" (August 2011). Archived at the Social Research Center, Auroville.

[36] "1974.02.28 Inauguration Pour Tous A – 16," 1974, Photograph, Auroville Archives.

funds allocated for their needs, which were instead collectively channelled into the For All/Pour Tous Fund.

Fig. 26. Pour Tous baskets.[37]

As I understand it, a confluence of events resulted in a significant shift away from the community's heretofore simplistic collective provisioning system in the 1980s, towards one in which individuals were allocated funds and credit *against the fulfilment of certain conditions*. Following the passing of The Mother in 1973, the Sri Aurobindo Society attempted to institutionalise her charismatic authority and guidance of the community into on-going management, which Aurovilians protested. The Sri Aurobindo Society went so far as to illegally withhold donations to Auroville, resulting in legal action and the involvement of the Central Government in the management of Auroville in 1980, as decreed in an act of Parliament, the *Auroville Emergency Provisions Act, 1980*. The withholding of funds had thrown the community into a state of economic

[37] "page 1730 2," n.d., Photograph, Auroville Archives.

precarity; its fledgling internal economy was not yet strong enough to sustain all of its members. The content of the community baskets had been meagre even with the financial support of the Sri Aurobindo Society – I heard numerous accounts of Aurovilians present at the time saying that on some occasions, they would look at its contents and wonder how they would make it through the week, feeling thrilled when butter was included.

In 1983, in the face of insufficient funds to provide for all Aurovilians, the community chose to allocate resources only to those who were working for Auroville.[38] This was the founding of the "Maintenance" system that is still in place today, in which Aurovilians receive a monthly stipend to an account in their name. The decision closely coincided with the granting of government funding to be disbursed to Aurovilians involved in education. A member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Kireet Joshi – a previous officer of the Indian government's premier civil service, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) – was appointed Education Advisor to the government of India by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976, a post which he held till 1988. In 1983/1984, Mr. Joshi secured funding from the Indian Government for Auroville as an experimental site of Integral education (the philosophy of education arising from Integral Yoga), founding the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) in Auroville, an entity that continues to receive and disburse the on-going government grant, along with other donations towards educational research in the community. In 1984, the grant was awarded to educators, which required them having individual accounts in their names for accountability purposes. To avail of this financing, Auroville needed a

[38] Interview with "Otto," Financial Service Executive, May 24, 2016.

more complex and individuated structure than that of a "common pot" which it had used to date.

The notion of individual accounts was antithetical to the communal ethos and economic ideals of Auroville; the shift from the collective to the individual as the primary locus of economic identity was perceived as a crisis of a divergence away from the founding aspiration of a collective life. The transition from centralised provisioning through Pour Tous to the individualised Maintenance system was a challenging one, as it effectively institutionalised a standardised exchange between each community member and the collective through, at least in part, the allocation of money, which for many was – and still is – a contradiction with the founding principles of Auroville's communal economy. I have heard on several occasions, people say, in tones bemoaning and berating, it is "not an *Aurovilian* system." The change prompted and was accompanied by a period of community-wide seminars, surveys and general meetings centred on a widespread concern with the economic orientation and organisation of Auroville, and the aspiration to set up a system that would reflect a continued commitment and development towards the original economic ideals.[39]

In the late 1980s, Pour Tous became computerised, and each individual member or family unit was given an account in which to deposit funds, and encouraged to deposit these in advance of their Pour Tous consumption.[40] The community basket service soon phased out, with each individual or family paying individually for each item taken. But it was not to be the end of common

[39] Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008*.

[40] Otto Alois, qtd. in Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008*, 82.

pots – a series of others would emerge almost immediately after the Maintenance system was established, which is explored in detail in Chapter 8.

7.2.1 The emergence of Auroville's current economic "system"

To mitigate the circulation of money in Auroville in the wake of the shift away from a simple common pot collective provisioning system to one in which individual community members were directly allocated resources, the community set up a new collective fund in 1991, the "Auroville Maintenance Fund,"[41] administered by a "Financial Service," operative to this day.[42] Each individual community member or family had their own account at the Financial Service – called a "Pour Tous" account at first, retaining the name of the original communal fund and provisioning service – into which they could deposit personal funds, and through which their Auroville Maintenance was channelled.[43] All Auroville entities – community members and units – had accounts at the Financial Service, enabling cash-free transfers within the community, which continues to be the norm today.

A communal fund and its mandate were established in June 1989, alongside the Auroville Maintenance Fund administered by the Financial Service. This "Central Fund" (now "City Services Budget")[44] collected earnings from Auroville Units, donations to the community, and a standard monthly

[41] Not to be confused with what I term "Maintenance system," which refers specifically to the system of allocation of stipends to community members, "Auroville Maintenance Fund" is the name of an Auroville-administered fund that consists of multiple accounts of Aurovilian individuals, commercial units, community services and projects.

[42] See "Financial Service / Auroville Maintenance Fund," *Auroville*, last updated Sep 4, 2018, https://www.auroville.org/contents/2829.

[43] Otto Alois, qtd. in Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth*, 83.

[44] The Central Fund was renamed "Municipal Services Budget" in 2007 (see Economy Group, "2007-08 Municipal Services Budget," *Auronet*, Oct 17, 2007, https://auroville.org.in/article/14246), and "City Services Budget" in 2008.

contribution from each Aurovilian adult[45] to fund Auroville's public sector, referred to in Auroville as the "Service" sector. There exist several categories of "Services." "Prosperity Services" provide for the basic needs of community members, based on The Mother's guiding directives that the basic needs of each would be borne and provided for by the collective. Others, such as "Municipal," "Administrative," "Education & Culture" Services are dedicated to non-commercial community development. Communal funds either fully finance or subsidise the operating costs and provisions made by these Services, as well as funding the Maintenances of Aurovilians working in them.[46] By contrast, Commercial Units directly fund their own operating costs, including the Maintenances of Aurovilians working in the same, since they are income-generating.

The "Economy Group," (now "Budget Coordination Committee"[47]), a representative group of revolving Aurovilians from various community sectors, was established to manage the budgeting and allocation of the communal fund. Previously, funds were distributed to various sectors and geographical areas of

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[45] In 1989, when this contribution was introduced, it amounted to Rs. 200 per individual, and was "voluntary." See Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth*, 85 – 86. By 2018, this amount had increased to Rs. 3150 per individual. For Aurovilian adults working in Services, this "City Services" (CS) contribution is waived. For Aurovilians working in Commercial Units, this contribution is typically paid to City Services by the Unit. Aurovilians who are not engaged in any formally registered Auroville activity pay this City Services themselves. Any Aurovilian may request a waiver of their CS contribution, to be approved by the Budget Coordination Committee, who administers the communal "City Services" fund.

[46] While some receive special donor support, see Isha and Nicole, "Overview of Auroville City Services Landscape," *Auroville*, accessed Aug 1, 2018, https://www.auroville.org/contents/3287.

[47] The BCC was mandated in February 2006, and became a functional body in September 2008, structured as a representative group consisting of 12 members from different Auroville Working Groups and various "sector groups" – one each from the Town Development Council, the Auroville Board of Commerce, the Auroville Board of Services, SAIIER (board of education), the Auroville Council, Green Group (Farm & Forest), Land Board, Unity Fund, Project Coordination Group, Human Resources Team (in charge of community member maintenances), Guest Facilities Coordination Group, 2 members representing the "Community at Large," as well as a secretary, resource person, and chairman.

Auroville as decided upon at "Envelope" community meetings, at which monies were disbursed in envelopes (as there was not yet a Financial Service with accounts for various Auroville activities).

The exploration from which this system of economic organisation initially emerged had several iterations – in 1996, just a few years after it was established, a survey of 1200 community members specifically asked which Services should be part of this centrally supported economy, as well as the conditions for receiving a Maintenance.[48] To this day, reforming the collective economic organisation of the community so as to more closely reflect its founding economic ideals continues to a be topic of strong interest in the community, with many informal groups of individuals,[49] as well as economic Working Groups, exploring how to do so.

It is important to note that this topic and challenge was alive prior to the shift of the 1990s as well. One Financial Services executive highlights a General Meeting in the early 80s, in which the community had come up with 3 steps to phase towards a collective economy. "We didn't manage to take the first!," he exclaimed. "There are no shortcuts," he offered as an explanation "we have to move ourselves," by which he was implying that we have to evolve as individuals in order for a collective shift to happen. "I'm quite busy with that, and I see how hard it is," he adds, with a disarming depth of sincerity.[50]

7.3 Departures from Auroville's Founding Communal Economic Principles

There have been several significant modifications of the economic system described above – still in place today – which many feel represent a further

[48] Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth,* 82.
[49] Such as the "Lotus Group," and "Exploring Prosperity."
[50] Interview with Otto, Oct 26, 2017.

departure from the founding economic vision and ideals of the community. In 1998, a 33% contribution policy was introduced, whereby all Commercial Units (the term used to describe Auroville's commercial enterprises), are expected to donate 33% of their net profit to City Services unspecified; previously no percentage was defined, and donors were able to specify areas to be funded by their contributions. In 2017, this 33% contribution policy was extended to any income-generating Services. In the mid 2000s, an Economy Group, faced with budgetary constraints, began requesting certain Services to become "self-supporting"; although they did not operate with the intention of generating a profit, they had to generate enough income to meet their operational costs.[51] In practice this has resulted in certain Services requiring a fixed or scaling contribution from Aurovilians to avail of their services provided.[52] Both the 33% contribution policy and the encouraging of Self-Supporting Services have had significant ramifications for Auroville's collective economy and economic solidarity, particularly due to the economic 'policing' they instigate. The following two sections will explore in detail the issues raised by and in the implementation of each, highlighting how the BCC – in charge of their economic administration – sought to navigate the bureaucratisation and contradictions each entailed. In order to do the latter, I make use of extensive quotations of deliberations held during BCC meetings.

[51] It is important to note that already in the prior decade (the 1990s), communal budget managers, faced with budgetary constraints, had asked certain Services (such as the Electrical Service) to charge Aurovilian consumers minimal amounts (below cost-price) in order to replace a portion of Central Fund financing.

[52] BCC Member "Nicole," Email message to Author, March 16th 2015.

7.3.1 The 33% Contribution Policy, or the policing of economic solidarity

The 33% policy was first established in 1998 to ensure that a reasonable amount was put towards the communal fund by all Commercial Units,[53] while leaving enough profits – 67% – for the Units to be able to re-invest in their own development should they choose to, something which Units intent on growing consider to be critical for the long-term prosperity of the community, or contribute to specific projects. However, while the 33% was introduced as a minimum Central Fund contribution, in practice very few units currently give more,[54] including ones that are widely perceived as being financially able to. The unintended consequence of the policy establishing a practised 'maximum,' rather than a minimum, has been decried by several individuals involved in Auroville's economic administration, notably at a recent General Meeting on the new *Code of Conduct* for Auroville units. One BCC member and Commercial Unit executive felt that the policy was flawed from the start, because it conflicted with The Mother's founding directive that Commercial Units would contribute all of their "surplus profit" to the community's Central Fund[55]; the fact that it would erode this understanding was thus a predictable outcome. It was not in the scope of my research to explore or verify quantitatively whether, on average, Auroville's Commercial Units did in fact contribute more to the communal fund before the introduction of the 33% policy. However, qualitative research yielded rich insights into a negative shift in attitudes that accompanied the adoption of this contribution policy, on the part of both unit holders and BCC members themselves, who referred to the contribution as a 'tax,' and linked the policy to the erosion of goodwill and solidarity.

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[53] A history of the introduction of the 33% policy can be found in *Auroville Today*, no. 29 (June 1991).

[54] Notably Tanto and Right Path Café.

[55] Paulette Hadagny, *The Auroville Foundation Act and The Mother's Guidelines* (Pondicherry: All India Press, 2005), 21.

Prior to the introduction of the policy, Commercial Unit executives decided independently how much they donated to the communal fund, and were able to make 'specified' contributions to designated sectors or activities.[56] The 33% is an unspecified contribution, and while Units are free to make additional specified donations, the practice has by-and-large disappeared; the only institutionalised carry-over is an "in-kind" (i.e. food items) contribution units can make towards educational activities, deductible from their 33%. That "in-kind" contributions are restricted to one sector seems contradictory to the ideal of no-exchange of money, promoting on the contrary a financialisation of Auroville's internal economy.

While Commercial Unit executives do not contest the role of the BCC as a dedicated community funding allocation body,[57] some reported that they had found it more compelling to form relationships with other Auroville projects by funding their activities directly through specified contributions. "People used to be able to come to us and say: 'Listen, I have a project, can you help me' – we cannot even listen to people with projects anymore,"[58] one Commercial Unit executive said to me, mournfully. Some resent the impersonality with which contributions are now arbitrarily expected of them, and administered by a mechanism they feel disenfranchised from:

> They [the BCC] have such a way of processing the money that you give, it's just MIND-blowing… because you've given this much more, then next year you have to give based on that and – it's just, it spirals off and… you sit there and say "why am I even doing this?"[59]

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[56] A notable example was a partnership in the 1990s between Maroma, one of Auroville's largest Units and highest contributors, and Auroville's Farm Group, in which Maroma subsidised Auroville Farms to grow and provide free food for the Solar Kitchen.

[57] Commercial Unit executives are not a homogenous group that shares the same views – I draw this particular observation from my attendance of Auroville Board of Commerce meetings.

[58] Interview with "Alaya," May 9th, 2016.

[59] Interview with "Alaya," May 9th, 2016. The actual BCC contribution policy requires Units to contribute a minimum of 33% of the profit of the previous year, not an amount determined on the basis of the contribution of the preceding year.

The erasure of mutuality and reciprocity predicated by the bureaucratic deployment of the 33% contribution policy has been corrosive to the fostering and maintaining of a sense of community, eroding what one Commercial Unit executive said used to be the "joy"[60] of contribution, as well as undermining a feeling of fellowship between Unit executives and the BCC. This is not surprising given that the BCC carries out a 'policing' role, requesting the balance sheets of Units to calculate the amounts due to the City Services, following up with people who have not contributed the full 33%.

However, BCC members are all too aware of the issues raised by the policy and its implementation – themselves bemoaning the fact that it compels them to act like "tax collectors."[61] The following conversation, sparked by the topic of pending contributions, offers remarkable insight into how they reflect on and resist bureaucratisation to safeguard an 'Auroville spirit.'

Fieldnotes from BCC meeting, August 24th 2017. [62]

"What is the total pending contributions?" asks Marvin, one of the members.

We look at the spreadsheet projected on the screen in the meeting room.

"Rs. 3.6 crores,"[63] *someone reads out loud. "That's the total arrears since 2010. For 2016/2017 [the past financial year] it's 1.5 crores pending."*

Several people utter shocked sounds. I am also quite taken aback. And at the same time, I note that there is no penalty on late contribution.

"We are becoming tax collectors," says Ralph, visibly dismayed. "I used to be on the Economy Group.[64] *People used to give. They should be generous and give. There is a different dynamic [at present]. It's not good. We don't want to go after units. Something is happening to this community regarding contributing. I'm just noting that. It's not good. We will become tax collectors. I have a strong feeling something is wrong." Getting to know*

[60] Interview with "Alaya," May 9th, 2016.
[61] Fieldnotes from BCC meeting, August 24, 2017.
[62] All names of BCC members used here are pseudonyms.
[63] Approx. GBP 400,000.
[64] The previous name for the allocating body of the communal fund (now BCC).

Ralph in the context of BCC meetings had been a gem of a discovery for me, his intelligent and heartfelt dedication to the community and its ideals anchoring what felt to me like a deep, "Aurovilian" spirit of the group.

"Often they don't give the minimum contributions," said Narayan, in his characteristically quiet and kind, yet clear tone. His presence radiated these qualities, which, alongside his competence and humility, reassured me that Auroville's future was in good hands. A young Aurovilian of about my age who had worked in banking in France, he had recently returned to the community with his young family and was working as a resource person for the BCC.

*"The more we become tax collectors the more people will try to avoid," says Marvin. "**Without choosing to do it** [be tax-collectors], **we are doing it**," he adds, in a stronger tone. "It's easier for us to have an excel sheet, to calculate the 33%, and to ask people to pay. Another option is to meet people and involve them in the decision-making. It's more time - consuming, and we cannot do it with a weekly BCC meeting…" After a pause. "We cannot decide alone. We have to associate everybody."*

"We have to take a step," says Clemence, acquiescing, and I felt relieved that it had all become so human. The vibe felt good – deeper, realer.

"We have to remind the community and unit holders that we are not tax collectors. Units are there to support all of us," says Arundhati, the Auroville Board of Services representative.

"Sometimes units don't know [that they have pending contributions], then get a big amount for years worth of arrears," says Praveen, the Auroville Board of Commerce representative. "This group is lacking competency in sending them clear requests."

A few of us, myself included, nodded. It sounded very plausible.

"When Solana was here [a community-at-large representative who was born and raised in Auroville] she said a lot of the younger people simply didn't understand clearly," Isabella adds.

"So we have to make a statement, give some information?" asks Clemence, trying to concretize next steps, with just an undertone of frustration which betrayed the many years she must have spent having these kinds of conversations, only to not see them followed up on.

"Shall we post something in the News and Notes?" asks Arundhati.

"As soon as we do that, an 'us & them' is created with the unit holders, and we don't want to do that. It should be a last resort," says Isabella, the BCC secretary.

"It requires <u>personal relationship</u>," emphasises Ralph, the Financial Service representative. "We just have to <u>do it</u>: Phone calls to those units."

"I get all kind of reactions when I contact unit executives" says Narayan, referring to

when he first informs them (via email) of their pending contributions. "People who are happy to pay, people who acknowledge the arrears but don't settle them, people who don't reply… it would help if someone could do a phone follow-up, sometimes they tell you a whole story, it's not easy," he says, uneasily, "… I'm not a fiscal agent. I'm not going to say if you don't pay it'll be an extra 10%. I don't want to do that, I didn't come here [to Auroville] *for that."*

The BCC members certainly did not feel like tax collectors to me. This exchange conveys that, despite the institutionalisation of economic policies in Auroville, there is another spirit that underlies and informs how the BCC functions, one that ensures that the human – and humane – remains central to it as an Auroville institution. Policies were not indiscriminately considered to be the key referent in addressing a given situation "objectively," on the contrary, the subjective and personal aspects of these were routinely discussed and assessed. I theorise this administrative practice as a "subjective objectivity." It is precisely the subjectivity in this objectivity that ensures that it remains "Aurovilian" in character, fundamentally flexible, responsive and solidary – relevant in the context of increased bureaucratisation in Auroville.

These findings may be surprising for some community members, however, who reported that they felt the BCC lacked empathy and understanding in their administrative practice. One Commercial Unit executive said she wished there were more "heart" behind it, [65] while I found that BCC members internally discussed issues pertaining to fellow community members with a surprising degree of compassion. I offer two points of consideration to account for this discrepancy. The first is that the BCC's communication practices do not accurately reflect and embody its administrative practice. The second is that the very existence of a policy, and its deployment – the "look and feel" of an objective tax

[65] Interview with "Alaya," May 9th, 2016.

alone – in and of itself has a detrimental effect on goodwill, and perhaps even on economic solidarity, within the community. Both have broader implications for developing forms and practices of institutionalisation and administration practice, in Auroville and other anarchist contexts, that retain a culture of mutuality.

7.3.2 On Self-Supporting Services, or the permeation of capitalist logic

In The Mother's early conceptions of economic provisioning in Auroville, she imagined community-funded "Services" that would meet the basic needs of Aurovilians without charging them individually for these, for this would be key to realising a society with no exchange of money. In the early years of community life, the Pour Tous Service operated this way, and as the community's size and economy grew, so did its Service sector – with Services fully or partially funded by the Central Fund, or as it came to be called, the "City Services" budget, based on how much the fund could support, how essential the Service was, and how many Aurovilians made use of it.

In the mid 2000s, the Economy Group in charge of this budgeting exercise assessed the model of centrally-supported Services as financially onerous and inefficient, and encouraged a shift towards "Self-Supporting Services" to address this. Self-Supporting Services were to operate in the same spirit as centrally-funded Services, in that they were to meet basic needs of Aurovilians on a cost-price, not-for-profit basis – but with no support from the City Services budget. They would have to push operational costs to users, something that partially-funded Services also must resort to, in order to stay afloat.

Doing so is problematic, because by asking these Services to be income-generating, it forces them to operate on a different economic logic – one in which community-members become consumers, causing Services to loose their

institutional character. Even though they may only be charging cost-price, having Aurovilians individually pay for services rendered goes against the economic ideals of collective and free provisioning, and many community members and Service administrators resent this divergence. The practice of charging, alone, can even arouse suspicion as to whether the Service is operating at a profit instead of in a true "spirit of service," to the point that their receiving financial support from the City Services Budget is contested. The current BCC is well aware of this "double standard" – Services are meant to provide services free of cost to Aurovilians, yet they are compelled to charge Aurovilians for services rendered because they are not fully funded – and the erosional dynamic it engenders for such Services.

Fieldnotes from BCC Meeting, Aug 31st, 2017[66]

"When we start giving a double standard – you have to be a Service but you can bill a little – it starts to go wrong," says Arundhati, the ABS representative, and an executive of a fully-funded Service. "How do you know what part to bill? If I had to bill, it would be a headache – where do I stop, how much do I take? Shankra Service was ***amazing****, it is going wrong because we are asking it to* ***BILL****. We really have to support the Services, but support them completely so that they don't have to go into billing things. I really think it is important to take care of all of us, and that is the way we are doing that, with Services. So I find it really hard that we ask Services to be self-supporting and then question them."*

"We have a lot of Services like this," Praveen adds, in a defeated tone.

"BCC we are for the Services, it is our strength. So each time I see a Service die…" Arundhati adds, her voice vibrant with exasperation.

"I so agree with what Arundhati says," Isabella pipes in. "Once you start charging, it's the end of the Service somehow."

"We have to do something about pure Services for Aurovilians," says Ralph, with earnest passion and concern. "This is the most crucial stuff. We've got to get back there. This dual thing [partially supported services] was a good intention, but it will destroy […]"

"Part of our mandate, one of the first things, is to promote an economy without exchange of money," asserts Marvin. "But we let things go naturally, and the market takes up

[66] All names of BCC members and the Services they discuss are pseudonyms.

allocation of resources, because we are not… I don't understand. It's as if we don't care."

"This table proposed to run a budget-based Pour Tous to the FAMC [a fully funded grocery outlet, where Aurovilians could get what they needed without paying for it directly, just like the original Pour Tous 'basket']*, and they shot it down," Ralph continues. "They didn't even understand. This is where Auroville is. 50 years… It's a failure for me," he says, with a disappointment that pierces my spirit, or rather, the Aurovilian spirit in me. "To commercialize [Services], that would be the easy path," he adds. "And it'll be efficient. But that's not the Auroville I want."*

In the latter exchange, BCC members are critically assessing, and mourning, the erosion of "pure" Services, ones fully funded by the central, City Services budget to provide for Aurovilians without charging them money, and key to the establishing Auroville as the economic 'real utopia' envisaged by The Mother. However, they find themselves unable to reverse this trend – the Pour Tous proposal, for instance, being rejected by their overseeing body, the FAMC, which is continuing to introduce policies that move away from a 'pure' Services model for the sector. According to the new 2017 *Code of Conduct*[67] for Unit Executives, drafted by the FAMC and WCom, any Service funding more than 50% of its own running costs should contribute 33% of their profits to the communal fund – just like Auroville's Commercial Units do.[68]

In administering Services and Commercial Units in the same way, this further erodes the identity of the former as belonging to a space of provisioning outside of the market, even normalising Services operating at a profit – something which is antithetical to their originally conceived role, and reflective of the current trend of neoliberalisation. The introduction of the policy is a direct consequence of the administratively untenable "double standard" raised in the above excerpted

[67] *Code of Conduct for All Trust and Units of the Auroville Foundation* (Aug 1, 2017).
[68] *Code of Conduct*, 17.

conversation, in which Services are required to charge, yet expected not to operate at a profit. It represents what a BCC member described as the "easy path," which unfortunately institutionalises a further departure from Auroville's communal economic ideals – and highlights the difficulty of establishing prefigurative utopias, within the constraints of the present, and influence of mainstream trends, in this case of a capitalist logic.

7.4 Maintenances: The Individualised Component of Collective Provisioning

Maintenances – individually allocated provisions – complement centrally funded Services in providing for the basic needs of Aurovilians, and this section will explore how their design and implementation negotiates and reflects the challenges of institutionalising Auroville's economic ideals. As previously highlighted, the Maintenance system was criticised, at the time of its emergence, for being a standardised, individualised exchange between each community member and the collective through, at least in part, the allocation of money, which for many was – and still is – a contradiction with the founding principles of Auroville's communal economy. These attitudes still exist today, with, in addition, the complaint that the cash portion[69] of Maintenances are too low[70] – recently exacerbated by the rising cost of living in India, and the cost of increasing numbers of Services being pushed to users. That said their design does reflect Auroville's core economic ideals – a collective economy in which the basic needs of community members are centrally provided for with no exchange of money – even

[69] In 2017/2018, the total Maintenance amount was Rs. 14,880, with a cash portion of Rs. 11, 000. See figure 27, p. 202, for itemised table.

[70] Several people pointed out to me that it is below the Indian minimum wage; cross-checking I found that it is only lower than Kerala's, the Indian state with the highest minimum wage, but the point remains valid – although this does not account for the provisions made by community Services.

though it does not fully meet them. I refer in this section to the Full-Time City Services Maintenance, as it is the standard centrally designed, administered, and disbursed Maintenance.[71]

7.4.1 Maintenances and the ideal of "no exchange of money"

To mitigate the exchange of money, City Services Maintenances are split, in each account, into designated INR currency amounts, into both 'in-kind' and 'cash' portions. While the cash credit can be withdrawn as Indian rupees, and freely used by Aurovilians, inside or outside Auroville,[72] the 'in-kind' portion cannot. It can only be transferred to and from other Auroville Financial Service accounts, so that it effectively acts like a local currency, a measure adopted worldwide to strengthen the economies of local communities.[73]

To maintain the element of collective provisioning, a portion of the standard City Services Maintenance is automatically allocated each month to a variety of services and collective funds in Auroville that provide for the basic needs of Aurovilians, notably health and food. This is allocated in the name of the individual and/or family, who can then avail of the 'in-kind' credit at the services. Aurovilians have some freedom in these allocations – for example, they can choose the eatery to which their lunch credit is transferred – and can also choose to allocate more of their in-kind credit in this way, to optional services such as Nandini, a clothing, linens, and tailoring outfit.

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[71] There exist other categories, such as a Part-Time Maintenance, Children's Maintenance, Student Maintenance, and Apprentice Maintenance. Notably, Maintenances awarded to Aurovilians working in the community's commercial sector are not centrally budgeted for and administered by the BCC, because Commercial Units are income-generating and thus in capacity to remunerate them directly.

[72] Although many Auroville services and eateries do not accept cash, but only payment via the Financial Service, so as to serve exclusively members or registered visitors of the community, to whom the Financial Service issues "Aurocards," its own debit card.

[73] See Peter North, "Ten Square Miles Surrounded by Reality? Materialising Alternative Economies Using Local Currencies," *Antipode* 46, no. 1 (2014): 246–65, http://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12039.

Full-Time Auroville City Services Maintenance, Itemised: 2007-2008 to 2017-2018

YEAR	Cash	Kind	Pour Tous	Lunch	Health	Total
2007-2008	Rs. 2,000	Rs. 3,000	Rs. 500	Rs. 750	Rs. 250	**Rs. 6,500**
2008-2009	Rs. 2,000	Rs. 3,000	Rs. 500	Rs. 780	Rs. 265	**Rs. 6,545**
2009-2010	Rs. 2,000	Rs. 3,500	Rs. 500	Rs. 780	Rs. 280	**Rs. 7,060**
2010-2011	Rs. 2,300	Rs. 3,500	Rs. 1,000	Rs. 860	Rs. 280	**Rs. 7,940**
2011-2012	Rs. 2,500	Rs. 3,850	Rs. 1,100	Rs. 950	Rs. 300	**Rs. 8,700**
2012-2013	Rs. 2,500	Rs. 4,500	Rs. 1,200	Rs. 950	Rs. 300	**Rs. 9,450**
2013-2014	Rs. 2,900	Rs. 5,150	Rs. 1,200	Rs. 1,150	Rs. 330	**Rs. 10,730**
2014-2015	Rs. 3,300	Rs. 5,150	Rs. 1,200	Rs. 1,300	Rs. 400	**Rs. 11,350**
2015-2016	Rs. 5000	Rs. 5000	Rs. 1,200	Rs. 1,430	Rs. 450	**Rs. 13,080**
2016-2017	Rs. 5000	Rs. 5000	Rs. 1,200	Rs. 1,570	Rs. 450	**Rs. 13,220**
2017-2018	Rs. 5500	Rs. 5500	Rs. 1,700	Rs. 1,730	Rs. 450	**Rs. 14,880**

Legend:

Cash	Cash for use within Auroville's internal economy (between accounts of Auroville's Financial Service), or for withdrawal
Kind	Cash for use within Auroville's internal economy (between accounts of Auroville's Financial Service)
Pour Tous	Community Grocery Service
Lunch	Community Kitchen Lunch
Health	Community Health Fund
Rs.	Indian Rupees

	Allocations in Cash
	Specified Allocations

Fig. 27. Full-Time Auroville City Services Maintenances: 2007-2008 to 2017-2018.[74]

7.4.2 On the basis of need – the allocation of City Services Maintenances

Maintenances are allocated according to work undertaken **if** the individual "needs" it – informed by the founding economic ideal of economic support from the community-at-large being awarded to individuals on the basis of *need*, and against their participation in the project. Financial need is determined by the Human Resources Team (HRT), a group that disburses the Maintenances allocated to specific Services by the BCC. If someone newly joins a Service, s/he must go to HRT if s/he would like to be awarded a City Services Maintenance. The HRT will then

[74] Data obtained from the Auroville Social Research Centre.

verify whether the BCC budget for that particular Service includes any additional City Services Maintenances that have not yet been allocated. If so, one will be awarded to the individual only if s/he does not have any other source of income or savings that are considered substantial enough for the individual not to require a Maintenance, based on his or her life circumstances. This process is based on goodwill – the HRT does not formally investigate whether Aurovilians have extra-Auroville assets, bank accounts, or incomes. While some feel this information should be accessible to HRT, many Aurovilians are against this – in keeping with a culture of respecting the individual sphere within the collective, enacting Sri Aurobindo's principle of spiritualised community, "unity in diversity," a foundational ideal for Auroville.

7.4.3 Standardised City Services Maintenances – balancing individual and collective provisioning

City Services Maintenances are a standard amount, with fixed allocations of the cash and in-kind portions.[75] Aside from the concerns with Maintenances being an "individuated" form of provision, there is also concern regarding their standardisation. This is an issue because it goes against the economic ideals of Auroville, in which people participate how they feel called to, and receive what they need. There is also criticism and resentment towards standardised Maintenances because these are based on a predetermination of people's "basic needs" by Auroville's economic Working Groups, which some Aurovilians feel is misjudged. To my knowledge, no in-depth evaluation has been undertaken on what

[75] All categories of City Services Maintenance are standardised, whereas Commercial Unit Maintenances are not, although there is a cap on the amount that can be disbursed as a Maintenance *and* deducted as an expense – Rs. 20,000 at the time of writing.

Aurovilians feel their needs are – certainly not recently, although this is something the FAMC did intend to undertake.[76]

Although many Aurovilians complain that the City Services Maintenance is too low, it has never been raised significantly – only in accordance with rising costs of living. Last year, for instance, the BCC raised the Maintenance level for the first time in several years, to match the rising cost of living due to the introduction of a new, comprehensive "Goods and Services Tax" or GST, by India's Central Government. Increasing Maintenances is not a default measure because of the on-going concern that these constitute an "individuated" system of provisioning that contradicts Auroville's communal economic ideals. When I was sitting in on meetings last year in which raising Maintenances, due to GST, was discussed, several members insisted that the in-kind portion of the Maintenance would have to be increased if the cash portion were to be. If not, we would be moving towards an even more individuated and cash-based economy. If the group was considering raising Maintenances, some felt they should first consider whether existing Services could be further subsidised instead, or new Services created, to better provide for Aurovilians, given that such measures would reduce the exchange of money in Auroville, one of the community's core economic aims. To come back to a point made in the previous section, the introduction of "Self-Supporting Services" has, however, significantly compromised this approach.

The BCC, and other Aurovilians, are well aware that the standardised Maintenance policy is not responsive to the diversity of individual needs, and that upholding a communal definition of individuals' "basic needs" is a "fallacy"

[76] I was approached by an FAMC member to assist in this during the course of my PhD.

for the Auroville project.[77] However, how to administer Maintenances in a "subjectively objective" manner is hard to envisage institutionalising at a community scale. In a BCC discussion centred on this, one member said:

> I agree that a person can have more than me **if he needs it**. I don't need Rs. 10,000, but I know people who need more than Rs. 10,000. I like the idea of having more flexibility to allocate according to needs, but it's very subjective; to implement it is very difficult.[78]

The next chapter will explore smaller-scale, collective accounts experiments that sought to uphold such flexibility, and an attempt to institutionalise their organising principles and administrative practices in an Auroville Service.

7.5 Conclusion: Subjective Objectivity, or the Bureaucratisation of Anarchy

"So a 'subjective objectivity' would be the opposite; perhaps an objective view that would not be imprisoned by the process of objectivism, objectification and quantification, but would remain attentive to subjective perceptions?"[79]

Auroville's historical trajectory clearly shows that Aurovilians have intentionally and strategically developed their communal economic framework to prefigure an "Auroville economy," although we have and continue to face financial, legal, and administrative challenges in doing so – as well as competing approaches to addressing these. We remain self-critical of our trajectories and outcomes, demonstrating a "critical" utopianism in an additional sense of the term, coined by Moylan to convey "critical" both in the sense of "critical mass" and "critique."[80]

In effectively establishing an alternative economic organisation based on our economic ideals nonetheless, including by re-purposing elements that

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[77] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017.

[78] BCC Meeting Sep 14, 2017. It is worth mentioning that a "Work, Maintenance & Contribution Policy Proposal" published by the BCC in August 2010 suggested a "Flexible Maintenance" stipulating "People who have a high commitment and a real need may receive more than the minimum full-time maintenance." See BCC, "Work, Maintenance & Contribution Policy Proposal," *Auronet*, Aug 30, 2010, https://auroville.org.in/article/23597.

[79] After reading a draft of this chapter, a BCC member drew to my attention the fact that Sri Aurobindo speaks of the dangers of an "objective subjectivism" (Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, 54), and offered this as a point of comparison. Email to author, May 25, 2019.

[80] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*.

disrupted these (such as Maintenances introduced to channel Indian Government funding) I argue that we have successfully engaged in the exercise of establishing a "real utopia"[81] or "concrete utopia"[82] – both terms that Marxist scholars use to describe existing projects, grounded in the material conditions of the present, while seeking to transform these.

However, our economic organisation has also failed to secure core prefigurative aspects of this economic utopia, such as fully-funded Services to provide for Aurovilians collectively outside of the realm of the market, in the face of financial and administrative challenges. The latter are closely linked with the increasing institutionalisation of Auroville's communal administration, which is currently in a predictable phase of bureaucratisation.[83]

Yet I observe that despite the artefacts of this bureaucratisation, such as policies, the process of economic administration – of the communal fund specifically – is retaining flexibility and responsiveness. This is what led me to theorise its nature as "subjectively objective," a concept that I further aliment with the reflexivity demonstrated by the fund's administrators. One of these offered the following reflection, in response to reading this chapter:

> Yes that's a real question: how is it that most of those who apply the current policies do so while regretting that this is so? Could they have led themselves into a trap? That is to say, instead of inventing new forms of management of the collective they relied on proven methods, rationally bureaucratic, quantitatively objectifying, which have their own consequences? The question is open.[84]

What these consequences are, or might be, is an important question for the community. As we have seen, one is the corrosion of a felt sense of community – even though the policies that abound in Auroville in its current phase of

[81] Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias.*
[82] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*.
[83] Weber, *Economy and Society.*
[84] Response of a BCC member after reading a draft of this chapter. Email to author, May 25, 2019.

bureaucratisation intend to capture community-level agreements based on clarity and fairness. This raises the bigger question of whether the character of this institutionalisation will stifle the spiritually prefigurative nature of Auroville's utopian project, which draws on subjectivity, in Sri Aurobindo's use of the term, highlighted to me by a fellow Aurovilian:

> Sri Aurobindo defines a society as 'subjective' when its individuals have found their psychic being, and want to live under its influence… He speaks of the principles of organisation of the communal life of a 'subjectivised' society; imagines systems that surpass objectivity, that draw on another dimension.[85]

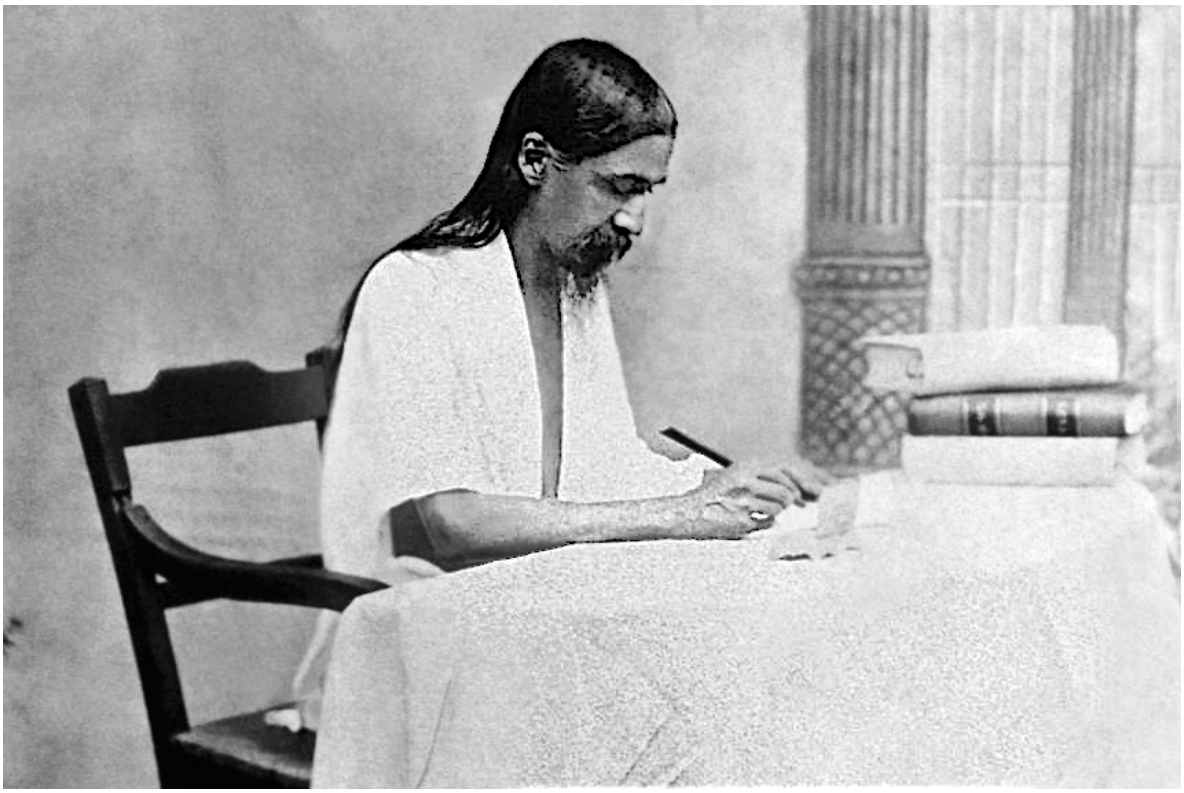

Fig. 28. Sri Aurobindo, writing.[86]

The next chapter will focus on how Aurovilians have engaged in prefigurative, collective economic experiments outside the sphere of economic administration that are intentionally predicated on subjectivity and flexibility, and on how these have contested, informed, and engaged with it in shaping the

[85] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017. See Sri Aurobindo, "Conditions for the Coming of the Spiritual Age," in *The Human Cycle*, 246 – 261.

[86] "Sri Aurobindo on Himself," Sri Aurobindo Ashram, accessed Oct 18, 2019, https://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/sriaurobindo/on_himself.php.

community's institutional economic development in accordance with Auroville's economic ideals.

8 The Institutional Potential of Prefigurative Experiments: Collective Accounts in Auroville

"*New forms are needed for the manifestation of a new Force*."[1] The Mother.

Throughout the community's history, Aurovilians have experimented with various, alternative socio-economic forms of association that sought to embody the community's ideals, as outlined by The Mother in her statements for how the township would be organised as an economic community, and inspired by Sri Aurobindo's writings on flexible, subjective systems of collective organisation. While the preceding chapter explored the development of Auroville's overarching communal economic administration, the current chapter examines economic practices outside of this "public sector." These are especially relevant to examine in the context of this thesis because they have been key to establishing economic institutions within Auroville, and are thus exemplifying enactments of a prefigurative utopian practice.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the development of a series of experiments in common accounts, and in the second I delve into a case study of a cooperative public service that they prefigured, the Pour Tous Distribution Centre. The emergence and development of these experiments, from the private sphere to the public, is revelatory of the various levels of political agency that shape Auroville's economic practices and organisation – from activist community members to community administrators to government advisors – which is significant in understanding the anarchic nature of its utopian practice. It also ethnographically substantiates the collective theorisation of utopian practice that I

[1] *Words of The Mother – III*, 90.

build on in this thesis, particularly the "critical,"[2] "transgressive,"[3] and "concrete"[4] dimensions of such practice. Additionally, it makes an empirical contribution to the wide-ranging body of work on cooperative economic practices and institutions.

8.1 Common Accounts

The common accounts I examine here came into existence in the early 1990s, following the adoption of the individualised "Maintenance" system, triggered by Auroville's economic relationship with the Human Resources Ministry of the central Indian government, recounted in the previous chapter. These were instigated by groups of Aurovilians who sought to contest this development, which they perceived as a critical breach from the existing communal economic organisation of the community, and from its socio-economic ideals, through the creation of alternatives that enabled them to actively reclaim and enact these ideals. As such, they exercised both what Moylan has theorised as "critical" utopianism,[5] by challenging developments within their own community, and what Sargisson terms a "transgressive"[6] utopianism, in developing alternative practices that politicised personal spheres to effect change in the public sphere. Although many of these common accounts failed, they were instrumental in prefiguring the community's existing cooperative institutions.[7] This section will describe and trace the historical evolution of these collective accounts in Auroville, highlighting how they have articulated with its founding ideals around economy, and community.

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[2] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10.

[3] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 1.

[4] Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, "Concrete Utopia: (Re)producing Life in, against and beyond the Open Veins of Capital," *Public Seminar* (7 December 2017), http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/12/concrete-utopia/.

[5] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10.

[6] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 1.

[7] Such as the Pour Tous Distribution Centre, a grocery cooperative explored in the following section of this chapter, and Nandini, a clothing cooperative.

8.1.1 Introduction: The Common Account

I discovered the practice of common accounts in Auroville at Sunday lunch, at home with my parents. Like in virtually every conversation at a family meal, we had wound up talking about Auroville – a habit that preceded my research, although the latter fomented it. On this particular Sunday, I had expressed concern over economic inequality in our community, and was raising questions about how Aurovilians who struggled financially were, or could be, supported economically.

"Well we had the Common Account," ventured my mother, Nicole. I had never heard of it. "Who started that?" I first asked. "We did!" she answered. "Who's '*we*'?" I retorted, thinking she meant Auroville at large. Nicole pointed at herself, while saying "and Peter," my dad. I was taken aback, as I had been many times throughout the course of my research, in discovering ways in which they had been involved in Auroville historically. "I was in the Financial Service at the time," Nicole explained. "I created the Common Account, and managed it, from there." I asked her how many people were members, expecting it to a low number, like, 12. My parents answered at the same time.

"100" said Nicole."50" said Peter.

"What did you say?" Peter asked Nicole, in a tone of incredulous disbelief. "200?"

"100," she replied, self-assuredly.

"I think it was more like 70," he countered.

"80," she said, conceding but clearly unconvinced.

Nicole explained that they all put money into the Common Account at the beginning of the month, and used the Common Account for their everyday

expenses. Individual usage was tracked, although this seemed to be primarily so that people who "had money" would give 10% extra on what they had used the previous month, so as to even out the balance for those who "didn't have money." People who were struggling financially could also come forward to the groups with specific funding requests – an example she gave was an electrical moped – and the group would see if they could support it. I asked my parents whether the shared account was a successful experiment, and Nicole responded, "Well, we were careful not to include anybody who was known to be financially irresponsible." When starting out, they had approached people they knew, who they thought would be interested. Once established, how did they decide if someone new could join? Nicole couldn't remember.

When I asked my parents who were members of the Common Account, I discovered it wasn't the only sharing account of its kind. Nicole started listing some names – "Françoise… Alain Bernard…" – when Peter interrupted her. "Alain Bernard?", he questioned. "I thought he was in Seed." I'd never heard of Seed either, and said as much. "Well people *still* don't know it exists!" Nicole remarked. "It still exists?" I exclaimed, even more surprised. "Yes," says Nicole. "Otto [a current executive of the Financial Service] manages it."

"Does the Common Account still exist?" I asked, now wondering if my parents have been part of some shared account I didn't know about for all these years. "No, no." says Nicole. "It dwindled after we left [Auroville, for family reasons, to France for four years]. "We started it in the early 1990s." All of sudden it clicked. From my previous research on Pour Tous Distribution Center,[8] the community's provisioning service, I knew that the 1990s had been a time of contested change to

[8] Clarence-Smith, "PTDC: Auroville's Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform of Conscious Citizenship."

Auroville's economic organisation. [9] "Was it in reaction to the creation of individual accounts that was happening around that time?," I remarked. "Yes, yes!" said Nicole, emphatically.

8.1.2 "Seed": Auroville's oldest common account

I met with Otto in the Financial Service shortly afterwards, to talk about Seed. He told me it was also started in the wake of the creation of the Financial Service in the early 1990s, by a small group who "wanted to do something different, wanted something collective – not an individuated system."[10] We notice here the same impetus – disappointment with a shift away from the collective ethos underpinning the community's economic ideals, galvanized into prefigurative action that reclaimed this. As we will see, the founding ideals around work in Auroville – that everyone in the community would contribute to it through work, but that this would be a practice of spiritual development and not a way to earn a living, Aurovilians' livelihood needs secured collectively – were crucial in informing the raison d'être of this common account. And the ideal of "unity in diversity,"[11] which strongly informs how Auroville envisions itself as a community, was key to how it was managed.

When Seed was started, there was only one formal requirement for people to join – that the person worked full-time in Auroville – while perceived adherence to the community's economic ideals, as outlined, were critical in securing membership. Just like with the Common Account, the small group who came up with the idea for Seed approached others who they knew might be interested in doing something different. The vast majority of members (30) had been there from

[9] Explored in detail in the previous chapter.
[10] Interview with Otto, member of Seed, Oct 26, 2017.
[11] Sri Aurobindo, *Social and Political Thought*, 499.

the very beginning of the fund, and no one had joined in recent years. Otto said it wasn't promoted, in part because 30 was a manageable size, and in part because the most important thing was trust – a trust which the existing members had now built over 30 years. For it to work, Otto said it was key that there was "affinity" between people, which I came to understand meant an affinity in terms of their commitment to Auroville's economic ideals.

Members with no individual savings sometimes required capital beyond the monthly subsistence amounts that they contributed into the account, and when I asked for what kind of expenses, Otto's response was revelatory of how much the existence of the fund was underpinned by Auroville's founding economic ideals:

> Flight tickets, or maybe something for the house, that may not be covered by Housing [the Housing Service, whose Fraternity Fund funded or subsidised repairs]. The issue is that we know a maintenance doesn't cover all the basic needs, and then people are doing extra work for money, and neglect what they should do, which is exactly what we didn't want to have happening here [in Auroville] – where work is supposed to be a help in one's own development.[12]

However, people who had asked to join in more recent years, on the basis of being financially strained were not admitted. While the fund did function in a solidary way, including members whose only source of income was the Auroville Maintenance – an amount insufficient for many in meeting their costs of living – charity was not reason enough to accept someone. Those driven primarily by financial self-interest were not perceived as sharing the same collective ethos that bound the group; solidarity with the latter stemmed from a shared sense of commitment to prefiguring the socio-economic ideals of Auroville, and a trust that had been built up over time.

The administration of the fund was also prefigurative of the flexible,

[12] Interview with Otto, member of Seed, Oct 26, 2017.

subjective systems that Sri Aurobindo had described for a spiritualised society,[13] and the ideal of "unity and diversity"[14] that Auroville aspired to embody as in its articulations of community – in this case economic. The account functioned similarly to the Common Account: everybody transferred in their Maintenance, or more, if they had private funds and could afford to, although this was not imposed. They all used individual accounts for their everyday charges, and at the end of each month, Seed would cover the expenses of each. Pluses and minuses on individual expenditures relative to their contributions were absorbed by the common account, which had an administrator that kept track of these, and addressed any issues if necessary.

I decided to meet "Arthur,"[15] Seed's administrator, to find out more about how this worked. "Each person could administer a common account in their own way," he started by saying. We were in the library, where Arthur also worked. "Personally, I don't take any risks – I continue to track on an individual basis," he said, a statement that perhaps betrayed the desirability of not doing so, given the community's ideals around collectivism. He only informs individuals, however, if there are major discrepancies between their expenditures and contributions. "If they have a big positive balance, I inform them – when people don't have ample means, I inform them if it's positive," Arthur explains to me. "Same thing for the negative. I don't tell them they have to reimburse it, I simply inform them. If it continues, I go and meet them, to find out if it's due to financial issues. I ask them to reimburse the fund *if* they can. If they can't, I put their balance back to zero."

Not requiring individuals to meet expenditures they were unable to, even if

[13] Introduced in the conclusion of the previous chapter. See Sri Aurobindo, "Conditions for the Coming of the Spiritual Age," in *The Human Cycle*, 246 – 261.

[14] Sri Aurobindo, *Social and Political Thought*, 499.

[15] Pseudonym.

they had personally incurred them, is revelatory of how the ethos of the fund was informed by the ideal of a collective responsibility of care in Auroville for members of the community – something that Arthur underscored in saying

> In the Aurovilian community, if you have an economic problem, it is not YOUR problem. It is a problem for the community to take responsibility for.[16]

Managing the fund in a way that was responsive to the unique situations of individuals, rather than by arbitrary rules, is demonstrative of the "subjective objectivity"[17] that is threaded through much of Auroville's administrative practice – inspired by The Mother's anarchic statements that there would be no fixed rules framed for the community,[18] and that a diversity of individual expressions would be upheld within it.[19]

Seed's financial health allowed for this flexible administration, because over the years a considerable credit had built up from unused monthly budgets, and from additional funds people would deposit into it. "The collective **generates** money," Arthur affirmed, "no one is left in need, it covers the needs of those who would not be able to do so individually AND it builds up credit." This credit was so significant that a savings account, "Sangha" ("community" in Sanskrit), had been created alongside the Seed current account. In addition to subsidising the regular living expenses of some, the savings of Seed were used to fund 'special needs' of members, and even to grant significant interest-free loans to Auroville projects and services that members were involved in.

This is especially significant to note in connection with Elinor Ostrom's

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[16] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017.
[17] See section 7.5 of this thesis.
[18] See *Words of The Mother – I*, 261, 266.
[19] Following Sri Aurobindo's principle of "unity in diversity." See Sri Aurobindo, *Social and Political Thought*, 499.

work on reclaiming the commons, which demonstrates that communal resources can be successfully managed and not fall prone to the free-rider effect, contrary to what the "tragedy of the commons"[20] theory suggests.[21] Among the principles she defines as key for their effective maintenance are clear boundaries, such as membership, and clear monitoring, such as the tracking of expenditures, both of which were assured in the case of Seed.

Interestingly, Otto told me that he had at one point tried to strengthen this savings account, by suggesting that people pool all of their money into it, but that it hadn't worked. Clearly, individuals only felt comfortable experimenting with a part of their individual wealth in this communal exercise, something that reflects an overarching trend in Auroville: many members, both Indian and non-Indian, keep a significant portion of their wealth in bank accounts or assets outside of the community. Some feel we should all invest individual financial assets into our community accounts, in solidary support of our economy – but most who have the possibility to prefer to ensure their continued financial independence from the community by investing significant amounts outside of it.

This capacity to define one's balance between individuality and community I consider to be one key to the overall success of the Auroville community in terms of longevity, in light of the scholarship on intentional community that identifies the curtailing of individual freedoms as detrimental for members in the long term, sometimes leading to the collapse of communities.[22] Interestingly, when I asked whether there were any guidelines regarding what people could spend money on, Otto said "No – because people have different needs," adding "Ashram 'needs' are

[20] Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162 (1968): 1243-1248.

[21] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[22] See Kanter, *Commitment and Community*.

not the same 'needs,' but we don't want to be like the Ashram."[23] This last statement underscores how Aurovilians embody the ideal of "unity in diversity,"[24] of affirming individual freedom within the framework of community, and how important this is in distinguishing themselves from other types of intentional communities that insist on commonality, achieved through adherence to rules.

8.1.3 Circles: A first attempt at scaling the practice of common accounts

The success of Seed drew the attention of the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, the legal entity that was created to formally recognise the community under India's Human Resources Ministry. Kireet Joshi suggested that the Seed experiment be scaled up through multiplication in the community. This recommendation coincided with a feeling within the community of being "off-track with our collective economy,"[25] one that was resurgent during my fieldwork period. A series of community-wide meetings ensued, in which Aurovilians explored the possibility of creating several common accounts, which were called "Circles."

The Circles experiment started out "full of people, idealism, enthusiasm,"[26] but despite the fact that this top-down suggestion was embraced within the community, it failed to successfully take root. Otto said it was because "it doesn't work with people who have nothing to do with each other."[27] He told me that most Circles fell apart in 6 months to a year; that some of them never even started because they got stuck in endless discussions, trying to agree on the conditions for

[23] While the question of what constitutes "basic needs" could be explored in the Auroville context, this goes beyond the scope of this thesis. See Paul Streeten, "Basic needs: Some unsettled questions," *World Development* 12, no. 9 (Sep 1984): 973 – 978.

[24] Sri Aurobindo, *Social and Political Thought*, 499.

[25] Interview with "Rebecca," member of Maheswari Circle, Dec 4, 2017.

[26] Interview with "Rebecca," member of Maheswari Circle, Dec 4, 2017.

[27] Interview with Otto, member of Seed, Oct 26, 2017.

their Circle. “For it to work, there has to be trust,” Otto emphasised, adding that the Seed group hardly ever meets, because “it’s not needed – we’ve known each other for 30 years.”[28]

One Circle – “Maheswari” – does still exist today. Just like Seed, it has no rules about personal expenditures, except for one: that members purchase and consume at Auroville enterprises, “because the whole thing was about supporting the collective economy.”[29] Although, “Rebecca”[30] remarked “it was not a rule, but an understanding. We were close-knit.” Trust and affinity were thus key for the success and longevity of both Seed and Maheswari. Unlike Seed, Maheswari did not even track individual expenditures – Rebecca said she felt it was antithetical to the idea of a common pot. Only when the account went into minus did they check, to understand why.

Because members trust each other, they do not worry that money is being misspent. However, this was not always the case. When they started out, the expenditures of some of the members were unacceptable to the group at large. One example was the purchase of a car (a luxury item in India), another the use of the common account to finance a large loan on new property. While the members were never formally expelled from the Circle, there were numerous “heated and emotional discussions” related to their spending, and they eventually left the group.

More than one Circle faced the issue of significant differences in how members related to the accounts – some with “aspirations for free money,”[31] while

[28] Interview with Otto, member of Seed, Oct 26, 2017.
[29] Interview with “Rebecca,” member of Maheswari Circle, Dec 4, 2017.
[30] Pseudonym.
[31] Interview with “Rebecca,” member of Maheswari Circle, Dec 4, 2017.

others "very idealistically gave everything they had."[32] Arthur, the administrator of Seed, considered the Circles experiment flawed because these common accounts were perceived by many as a way to increase their purchasing power, rather than as tools for the development of individual and collective consciousness.

"Siobhan,"[33] a member of the "New Dawn" Circle, felt that many of those who did approach these idealistically were "let down," and that this happened "too many times."[34] New Dawn Circle had, according to her account, worked very well for two to three years, until it "ended with a crash!" when one member bankrupted the common pot. He decided to leave the community, purchasing expensive clothes and shoes before doing so, and leaving his teenage daughter behind, for the group to support financially.

She nonetheless considers the Circles to have been a useful experiment, because it was a "lively process of people coming together for interesting discussions and ideas for an internal and in-kind economy for Auroville," a collective learning process which as we shall see was prefigurative of a successfully institutionalised communal accounting system, the basis of the community provisioning service "Pour Tous Distribution Centre." She also emphasised the learning aspect of the New Dawn Circle at an individual level, relating it to the prefigurative process of becoming Aurovilian; she highlighted how participating in such an experiment required Aurovilians to "lose the sense of personal possession" – a line from The Mother's text *To Be A True Aurovilian.* This required a change of consciousness, Siobhan remarked, thus pinning the potential of such an experiment to succeed on the evolution of spiritual consciousness that

[32] Interview with "Siobhan," member of New Dawn Circle, Dec 6, 2017.
[33] Pseudonym.
[34] Interview with "Siobhan," member of New Dawn Circle, Dec 6, 2017.

Integral Yoga was predicated upon. Unfortunately, New Dawn failed to safeguard itself from the lack of consciousness of just one of its members, and thus failed as a discrete common account – a high price to pay for a group experiment. How effective of a tool it was for members to develop that change of consciousness, however, would be difficult to ascertain.

8.1.4 Prosperity: Connecting common accounts experiments with social Services

The next common account experiment I would like to briefly examine is the shared savings account "Prosperity," which was founded in 2006 after the collapse of the Circles experiment (by the group of Aurovilians who concurrently established the Pour Tous Distribution Centre, a cooperative groceries Service, which will be explored in detail in the subsequent section). Members of Prosperity contribute a small, standard monthly amount into the fund,[35] from which they can seek financial support in times of need for expenditures incurred at designated Auroville Services that provide for "basic needs," thus beginning to explore an institutionalised collective provision for basic needs.[36]

My conversation with its administrator, Arthur (the same person who managed the common account Seed) revealed once again a resistance to bureaucratisation. I was trying to understand how Prosperity worked in practice, and asked whether people came to him with bills from one or more of the Services to be paid out of the fund. Arthur virtually bounded, responding in volley:

> I don't need the bill. Sometimes people offer it to me, but I don't want it. The idea

[35] Rs. 150.

[36] These Services were Nandini, Auroville's clothing & linens Service, PTDC, Auroville's cooperative grocery, the Dental Service (because it is not included in the Health Fund, which all Aurovilians are encouraged to be members of). It once included the Solar Kitchen (Auroville's central community kitchen), but not since lunch has become a centrally funded "in-kind" provision within City Service's Maintenances, "lunch scheme."

> is not to check – it's not an insurance. That's not the idea at all.[37]

If members had to be policed, the project was pointless as an experiment in prefiguring a spiritualised society, which, as Arthur shared with me, Sri Aurobindo had envisaged would develop "subjective"[38] forms of communal organisation. Instead of being based on objective and uniformly imposed rules, these would be responsive to the spiritual evolution of individuals and thus able to foster the spiritual evolution of a collective.[39]

> Prosperity for everyone, there's no point in creating it because it already exists [in the world] – with policies, which are detestable but indispensable. Administrators become cops – there is no point in that.[40]

He explained that such "subjective" experiments could not be "forced" into being, they had to correspond with the perceptions and experiences of those participating within them. For this reason, just like Seed, Prosperity is not advertised. For a decade, the fund covered all member requests without running into financial issues, with no policy for how much any individual could 'claim.' In 2017, the fund collapsed, and Arthur asks himself why this happened. "Because the prices have increased?[41] Because people consumed more?" His questions sound both genuine and rhetorical at the same time. "I think maybe people started using it as an insurance," he said – by which I assume he meant taking advantage of an opportunity to be refunded, rather than reserving this for times of need. "The downside is that few people participate in these kinds of collective economic

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[37] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017.

[38] Aurobindo used the term "subjective" to describe an experience or perception that was elicited from individuals' contact with a higher plane of consciousness. See Sri Aurobindo, "Subjective Experience and the Objective Reality," in *Complete Works of Sri* Aurobindo, Vol. 30, Letters *on Yoga – III* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2014): 21 – 23.

[39] Sri Aurobindo, "Conditions for the Coming of the Spiritual Age," in *The Human Cycle*, 246 – 261.

[40] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017.

[41] The "Goods and Services Tax" (GST), a comprehensive consumption tax (collected at the point of purchase) on goods and services, introduced in India in July 2017, increased the prices of these by up to 28%.

experiments, because they are not interested," he remarked, as our conversation drew to a close. "That's my assumption, you'll be able to tell me what you've found, at the end of your research."[42]

8.2 Pour Tous Distribution Centre

I turn now to Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC), as an Auroville Service that has effectively institutionalised the socio-economic ideals and shared accounting systems of the various, small-scale experiments in common accounts. It is interesting to consider given its significantly more important scale and degree of formalisation as a public service, and the prefigurative process it is in turn fostering at an institutional level within the community.

8.2.1 The Emergence of PTDC

Just like the first common accounts, PTDC emerged in protest of a socio-economic trajectory that was perceived as antithetical to Auroville's collective ideals. In the early 2000s, funding for a new facility for Pour Tous – the historical provisioning service for members of the community[43] – prompted a group of about ten concerned individuals (including my mother) to gather and reflect on how this new outlet could be run in a way that would re-affirm Auroville's evolution towards the communal economy envisaged by The Mother, in which Aurovilians would give what they could in terms of work and involvement and have their basic needs met without the exchange of money, through centrally supported services.

[42] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017.
[43] See Chapter 7, Section 2.

They felt compelled to do so because the existing institution, which had started out as a solidary common pot[44] had devolved into an ordinary, profit-making shop, which they felt deeply disappointed by: "30 years to arrive to the point where we were just selling and buying to each other!"[45] one of the members exclaimed to me. While the existing Pour Tous was located in the current outskirts of the community,[46] the new site was centrally located, in its "Service Area": a complex of Services that included the community kitchen, "Solar Kitchen," "Nandini," a clothing and linens service, the "Free Store," and "ServiceLink," the central administrative hub of services. The PTDC group – composed of several members of the Auroville Board of Services – felt that the existing Pour Tous model would be incongruent with the ethos of these other Services, in addition to being incongruent with the socio-economic ideals of Auroville in general, and feared that

> [I]f we were not going to run this outlet as a community service without the exchange of money, because it was at the centre of Auroville, we could say goodbye to Auroville as a society without the exchange of money, where people are supported, they give what they can in terns of work and involvement and they receive what they need without exchange on money - which is what it's supposed to be.[47]

At the time, Pour Tous, despite being registered as a "Self-supporting Service," a solidary outfit that provides for everyday needs of the community, levying only enough to cover its cost of operation and development, was in fact generating a substantial profit. This was a significant breach of ethics, because its profit was being derived from charging Aurovilians a mark up for basic needs, which should be provided for with no exchange of money according to the community's ideals. At the time of my doctoral research, a review and

[44] See Chapter 7, Section 2.
[45] Interview with "Anandi," PTDC manager, April 14th 2016.
[46] The main residential area (Aspiration) at the time of its founding.
[47] Interview with Nicole, PTDC Support Group member, April 12, 2016.

reform of the Service, renamed the Pour Tous Purchasing Centre, was being undertaken by the community's key economic groups, the BCC and FAMC.[48]

The PTDC group sought to elaborate guidelines that would more closely reflect the community's socio-economic ideals. In brief, the concept was that PTDC would operate as a cooperative, in which members would contribute a certain amount monthly, and then take whatever they felt amounted to their 'basic needs.' The Service would be centrally supported, and not self-supporting, meaning that the cost of operation, such as the overhead expenses and the Maintenances of Aurovilians working in the Service, would be borne by the collective – the Central Fund administered by the BCC. The group presented the concept to the BCC in 2005, with 160 people ready to participate in the experiment.[49]

The request was strongly challenged by the BCC ("Economy Group" at the time) for a number of reasons. One was the concern that fully supported services were too much of a drain on the collective economy – self-supporting services were preferable.[50] Another was that the PTDC model, which was based on membership, did not warrant collective funds.[51] Furthermore, it was anticipated that the model of participation would be abused; people would take more than they contributed, the service would end up financially overdrawn, and the Central Fund would be compelled to bear the cost.[52]

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[48] Fieldnotes of BCC meetings, May 5, 2016 and May 12, 2016.
[49] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.
[50] Interview with Nicole, PTDC Support Group member, April 12, 2016.
[51] Interview with Joseba, former member of Economy Group, May 13, 2016.
[52] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.

After many difficult meetings, the BCC decided to award the new Pour Tous a small budget – Rs. 38,000 – and a time for experimentation.[53] The Service began to operate in 2006, with many involved in running it doing so on voluntary basis,[54] and membership more than doubled in the first year.[55] At the end of the first year, in 2007, the Economy Group (BCC) called for a General Meeting[56] to determine whether the experiment should continue to run and be supported by the Central Fund.[57] According to the group active in launching PTDC, the Economy Group was "certain" the outcome of the meeting would be to end the PTDC experiment, and that was their motive for calling it. However, the community at large ended up resonating with the PTDC project:

> What works in Auroville is when you have actually a small group of people who are cognizant of what they are doing and who really try to work it out in detail and come to the community with something that makes sense, and that's congruent with what Auroville is supposed to be, is understanding of the possibilities and limitations of today, and is able to come up with a project that can stand. And if you do that you have people behind you… because you still have a majority of people in Auroville who really come for these ideals. So when something happens like that, there is a resonance. There was a resonance in that meeting. It was like, "Yeah, this is what we want." [58]

8.2.2 PTDC 2018

I began researching PTDC in 2016, a decade after it was founded. At the time of writing, PTDC operates as a centrally supported Service, with a recurring budget for its running expenses allocated by the BCC from the community's communal fund. Its membership in 2018 was 1500 people, which represents the majority of the Auroville population. They are called "participants," emphasizing that this is a participatory, collective experiment –

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[53] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.
[54] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.
[55] Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and* Earth, 102.
[56] A meeting of all community members that constitutes the ultimate mechanism of community decision-making. See Chapter 5 of this thesis, on Auroville's political organisation.
[57] Interview with Nicole, PTDC Support Group member, April 12, 2016.
[58] Interview with Nicole, PTDC Support Group member, April 12, 2016.

language that is drawn from a statement The Mother made about Auroville: "All who live there will participate in its life and development."[59]

The physical space was intentionally designed with all shelving along the walls and a largely free and empty space in the middle, consciously avoiding conventional supermarket rows that do not invite people to pause or interact comfortably with others, to create instead an informal community meeting space. Interaction between participants is the norm, many greeting one another with affection and entering into conversation ranging from personal matters to those of concern in community life and functioning.

Fig. 29. PTDC at lunchtime, an opportunity to interact with other community members.[60]

How does PTDC operate, in practice? PTDC is open to Aurovilians, Newcomers,[61] and long-term Volunteers,[62] and has only in the last year begun

[59] *Words of The Mother – I*, 261.
[60] "PTDC Lunch Service 2016," 2016, Photograph, Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.
[61] People in the process of becoming Aurovilian.

refusing new members, because lack of human resources and the current accounting system make it challenging to continue to scale. As per PTDC's original guidelines, participants choose from one of three standard monthly contributions[63] as approximates their needs, but in practice these contribution amounts are flexible.[64] The funds are collected into a single common account, named "Prosperity,"[65] and are used to purchase a range of items according to certain criteria that correspond to the category of 'basic needs,' are affordable in the Auroville context, and reflect 'conscious' consumer choices, such as healthiness, quality and eco-friendliness. Auroville products are prioritised, and several Auroville commercial units offer their products at a cost-price or on a discounted basis. The 'spirit of service' is a key criteria for the acceptance of items proposed by Auroville units or Aurovilian home-made products; PTDC avoids carrying goods whose price is inflated in order to derive profit on purchase, as this goes against the ideals of service and fraternity that were at the core of the cooperative.[66] Participants may select any of the items available in the cooperative, and PTDC offers a small range of items per category, in an attempt to strike a balance between meeting people's needs without imposing uniformity, while at the same time not encouraging a "consumer society."[67] This harks back to Auroville's ideal of

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[62] People who are not community members, but residing and volunteering in Auroville for a period of at least 3 months.

[63] 'Minimum' (Rs. 2300 for adults, Rs. 1200 for children), 'Medium' (Rs. 3000 for adults) or 'Maximum' (Rs. 4000 for adults, Rs. 2000 for children) .

[64] The standard contributions were calculated using the 'in kind' value of the Auroville maintenance as a basis, which covers a daily lunch at participating Auroville eateries. The 'Medium' PTDC contribution of Rs. 3000, represents 2.5x the value of the in-kind lunch scheme (Rs. 1200), or equivalent to 2 and half meals per day.

[65] Not to be confused with the shared savings account "Prosperity," described in the previous subsection.

[66] Interview with Nicole, PTDC Support Group member, April 12, 2016.

[67] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.

collectivity, based on Sri Aurobindo's conception of "unity in diversity,"[68] and The Mother's statement that the community is responsible to provide for its members "on the basis of minimum needs."[69] While being a "common fund" as Pour Tous originally was, it is far more flexible in how it meets the needs of individuals, who can choose whatever they would like to take instead of receiving a standard basket of provisions.

Members are expected to contribute in relationship to their usage, which is posted 3 times a month on the public notice board at the entrance of the cooperative on the 16th, 26th and last day of each month. Usage represents the tally of the Rs. cost of the items selected by the participant to date,[70] which is tracked at a checkout counter, although no itemised statements are provided.

Fig. 30: Pour Tous Distribution Centre checkout counter.[71]

[68] Sri Aurobindo, *Social and Political Thought*, 499.

[69] *Words of The Mother – I*, 261.

[70] This cost is the same as PTDC's price of purchase, given that operational expenses of the service are subsidised by the Central Fund.

[71] "PTDC Checkout 2016," 2016, Photograph, Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.

The Rs. cost of items are not displayed on the shelves, because the service would like people to focus on their needs, without their perception of these being influenced by the price of items, in addition to emphasizing that none of the items are on sale – an important ideological point the Service wishes to make given The Mother's statement that there ought to be no "internal exchange of money" in Auroville.[72] One of the key criteria for the selection of items available at PTDC is affordability, so that individuals subsisting on the modest Auroville Maintenance – the economic demographic PTDC is designed to serve – would be able to provide for their daily life while remaining within their PTDC contribution budget. However, a binder with the pricing list for all PTDC items is available for people to consult, and those who find themselves overdrawn can request to assess their itemised consumption costs with the PTDC managers to address this. Participants who regularly overuse are contacted throughout the year and requested to refund the service. Certain people with scarce financial means try to avoid raising their monthly contribution even if their consumption often overshoots it, preferring to pay back the service the exact amount it owes, in the hopes of saving money. The Service, however, tries to discourage this pattern, both because it goes against PTDC's collective economic ethos, and because it makes for more complex accounting. When collective usage is higher than collective contributions, the Service does also appeal to all participants to make an additional donation, if they can afford to – so that these excesses can be collectively subsidised. There are participants who intentionally choose to make monthly contributions that are higher than their relative consumption, because they know that this will subsidise those that are struggling financially, and feel positively when their monthly

[72] "Early Talks," 263.

contribution exceeds their use:

> I couldn't care less at the end of the month when my balance is positive that it goes to the common pot, I find that fantastic… It's no longer me or you, we are one. We are one. It's the collective.[73]

PTDC has only had to ask a handful of participants to leave the service in its decade-plus history.[74] In one PTDC support group[75] meeting I attended the topic of termination of membership was raised, the manager hesitantly asked about the group's view on a few individuals who were consistently over-using and failing to reimburse the service, quickly adding "I don't like termination. Do we give them more time?" Apparently, the group already had raised this issue with these participants several times, to no avail – pointing out that if the reasons were financial difficulty, they had in the past figured out how to help with that. They decided to give those individuals a few months notice before ending their membership, and to invite them to re-apply after 6 months. The same meeting had also been called to discuss the case of a PTDC participant, who had requested to be refunded Rs. 8000 worth of unused contribution the previous year – something that had never happened before, and shocked the team for its breach of understanding of the principles of the Service.

Later, I remarked to my mother, one of the founders of the Service, that there seemed to be quite a few members of PTDC who were not interested in it as a socio-economic experiment, but because it was cheap and centrally-located.[76] "Yes," said Nicole. "When Jocelyn and I first started PTDC, it was very important to

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[73] Interview with Ann, May 16, 2016.

[74] New Economy Lab, "Auroville Internal Consumption and Production," *AurovilleRadioTV*, 31 January 2017, https://www.aurovilleradio.org/transitioning-towards-a-basic-needs-gift-economy-2/.

[75] A group consisting of the Service's founders, managers, and engaged participants.

[76] Although it is important to note that in a recent survey of all food outlets in Auroville, 71% answered that their "main" reason for going to PTDC was "Aspiration and Principles". See Auroville Residents Assembly Service, *Food Distribution Survey – Results*, 8 Feb 2016, *Auroville*, last accessed March 12, 2019, http://www.auroville.org.in/article/55767.

us that only people who were in it for the socio-economic experiment aspect become members. But others believed in strength in numbers – it's one of the ways to measure success."[77] Unlike Seed, and other common accounts experimented that could select members, as a public service PTDC is a 'mass' common account project. In light of the dissatisfaction of some with the pooling of resources aspect of PTDC, however, the team is considering whether an eventual second location should operate as a standard capitalist shop, with individual purchasing, while retaining nonetheless its non-profit nature. In the existing PTDC, only those members who are explicitly interested in the shared account experiment would remain, which the team hopes would enable them to develop it further together.

8.2.3 To what extent is PTDC Prefigurative in the Auroville Context?

To what extent is PTDC "prefigurative" of Auroville's socio-economic ideals? Opinions differ among its participants. Some feel that it represents a significant step towards the future of the Auroville economy in terms of the realisation of its ideals,[78] whereas others challenge its economic model as a step towards a collective economy with no exchange of money. Uma, a member of one of Auroville's economic think tanks[79] feels that PTDC, in successfully institutionalising the previous rounds of experimentation around shared accounts, has

> managed to make a certain entry into that new economy and held it. And make it work and make it really work – it has crossed over this survival crunch… it has landed in the consciousness of people.[80]

[77] Fieldnotes, Conversation with Nicole, Oct 5, 2017.
[78] Interview with "A," PTDC participant, May 16, 2016.
[79] "Economy Action Group."
[80] Interview with "Uma," PTDC participant, May 5, 2016.

Ann, who had managed Pour Tous from 1983 to 1990 during its phase of transition from a collective to an individual basis of provisioning,[81] considers PTDC to be "the future of the Auroville economy":

> In any case of what I call the base economy – food, education, health... and I think PTDC will one day cover all this, and perhaps even go further. I don't yet have the vision of that, I am not an economist. But for me it is obvious that PTDC is that… something that brings us together, that unifies us.[82]

Others, however fail to see how the economic model of PTDC is prefigurative of an economy with "no exchange of money," in which people's needs are assured for by the collective. Each person contributes in money, and their consumption is individually tracked on the basis of the Rs. cost of the items they select. They are expected to contribute more if their individual expenditure does not meet their budget, and thus they consider the experiment to be flawed, and even hypocritical.[83]

Many people, however, once they established what their monthly budget was on average, no longer worried about their consumption. They enjoy not having prices foregrounded, and do not track their expenditure. According to Arthur, most members of Seed also have no idea what their current 'balance' in the common account is at any given time – what they know is he is taking care of monitoring it for them, in relation to the balance of the account as a whole, and feel that "letting go is beautiful."[84]

While some PTDC participants would find it preferable to not have any individual tracking whatsoever, because they consider it antithetical to the idea of a collective economy, others consider that having PTDC take care of

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[81] See Chapter 7.

[82] Interview with Ann, PTDC participant, May 16, 2016.

[83] Interview with "D," PTDC participant, April 30, 2016; Interview with "S," PTDC participant, Email message to Author, May 12, 2016.

[84] Interview with "Arthur," Nov 29, 2017.

monitoring expenditure on their behalf is actually a step towards a communally organised economy,[85] and that being reminded of the limits of their budget "is necessary at this stage of our consciousness as very few of us may claim that they will take only what they absolutely need!"[86]

Anandi, the PTDC manager, recognizes that asking people to base their choice on need and not on prices is challenging for many, at a psychological level: "how much do you take when you don't need to look at prices? What is it that you need? How do you react when you are confronted with that shelf which doesn't say any price?" [87] She points out that when people begin their membership, and she asks them what their monthly budget is, most don't know – even though they have been shopping at outlets with prices till then. To her, that is an indication that pricing each item does not actually amount to one being conscious of one's expenditure, despite some participants' exhortations of the contrary. Rather than limiting their capacity to be conscious, some participants argue that it forces them to be:

> it forces us – this is the part that interests me the most, it forces us to be conscious about what we are doing.... There are people who complain afterwards, saying how come you don't show the prices? It is up to us to be conscious. And why do I like this PTDC – it's that. It's an adventure, also, of consciousness.[88]

In this way PTDC is also about unlearning old patterns and relearning new ones, which, as Siobhan had highlighted in the New Dawn Circle experiment, is key to the project of Aurovilians becoming more 'conscious.' That said, members who are financially stressed do not have as much economic and psychological freedom to experiment with doing so in practice, even if they align with the ideals in

[85] Interview with Chali, PTDC participant, May 21, 2016.
[86] "SA," PTDC participant, Email message to Author, May 11, 2016.
[87] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.
[88] Interview with Ann, PTDC participant, May 16, 2016.

principle.

8.2.4 Prefiguring Institutional Economic Relationships

A key dynamic that has been noted by those involved in the co-operative movement is how much solidarity is generated between co-operatives, and that this prefigures alternative socio-economic relationships that are not predicated on profiteering from competitiveness.[89] One important aspect to consider in the PTDC experiment is that it fosters relationships with Auroville's commercial units that prefigure Auroville's ideals for its economic organisation. It has also formed solidary relationships with non-Aurovilian suppliers whose ethos resonate with that of PTDC and of the Auroville community at large, and who sell their goods to the PTDC at a discounted rate.

Several of Auroville's commercial units contribute their products to the Service at cost-price because it operates on a zero-profit basis and caters exclusively to community members. The executives of Maroma, the highest contributing commercial unit to the community since it was founded in the 70s, highlight PTDC's unique role and potential in Auroville's communal economy thanks to this model, noting that PTDC has offered them a channel through which they can contribute their products to the community at cost-price, where no other such platforms exist.[90] Margarita, an executive of MG Ecoduties, an Auroville unit that develops environmentally-friendly soaps and household detergents and supplies these at cost to PTDC, says she does so because she strongly believes in a gift economy for Auroville, and PTDC is creating a paradigm shift in this regard, as it is a model based on values of the gift

[89] "Co-operate or Die," *ANTINUNIVERSITY NOW* Workshop, June 7, 2018.

[90] Interview with Paul and Laura, executives of Maroma, cost-price contributing unit to PTDC, May 9, 2016.

economy and not on a capitalistic system.[91] These and other executives with profitable businesses expressed that they foresaw donating their products to PTDC in the future.[92]

Fig. 31. MG Ecoduties at PTDC.[93]

In this way PTDC prepares for what could eventually become a Service that not only does not sell products to Aurovilians, but also does not buy them from Auroville units, thereby realising the community's economic ideal of operating with "no exchange of money." One could envisage that Commercial Units that would not be able to donate their products in addition to their financial contribution to the Central Fund would account for these as 'in-kind' community contributions, a mechanism that already exists for other communal provisions.

[91] Interview with Margarita, PTDC participant and executive of MG Ecoduties, cost-price contributing unit to PTDC, April 27, 2016.

[92] Maroma and Naturellement.

[93] "PTDC 20160716," 2016, Photograph, Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.

Although, as one unit executive pointed out, only few Commercial Units produce basic goods items that would be of use to the community, others could contribute in cash towards the purchase of such items that may be lacking. It bears noting that Pour Tous, in its infancy, set the precedent for the practice of units contributing towards the collective; Claire Fanning had reached an agreement with all Auroville units that they could contribute a certain percentage to it directly.[94] It also aligns with The Mother's directive for the participation of industries in Auroville:

> The industries will participate actively, they will contribute. If they are industries providing articles that aren't in constant need – and are therefore in amounts or numbers too great for the township's own use, so that they will be sold outside – those industries must naturally participate through money. And I take the example of food: those who produce food will give the township what it needs (in proportion to what they produce, of course) and it is the township's responsibility to feed everyone.[95]

This could form part of an evolution away from an individual and towards a communal responsibility for the provision of the basic needs of community members, as she intended. The PTDC management hopes to support such a trend, envisaging that the Central Fund could allocate a 'basic needs' contribution for community members at the cooperative, now that a collective budget has been ascertained through the use of one account for purchase of goods.[96] This is already being partially prefigured by some participants having their PTDC contribution allocated to the cooperative from the cash and/or in-kind portion of their Maintenance before the latter is disbursed to their individual accounts.

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[94] Fanning, "For All/Pour Tous & the Early Years of Its Economic Development."

[95] *The Mother on Auroville*, 24.

[96] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016. Some PTDC participants already have their contribution allocated to the cooperative from the cash and/or in-kind portion of their Maintenance before the latter is disbursed to their individual accounts.

8.3 Conclusion: Approximating a Spiritualised Society

The series of common accounts experiments, leading up to and including PTDC, have clearly been sites of prefigurative utopian practice in which Aurovilians have attempted to concretise the community's founding socio-economic ideals – such as providing for Aurovilians' basic needs collectively, and eliminating the exchange of money between Aurovilians. These initiatives were driven by community members who, disappointed with the status quo of Auroville's collective economy, sought to reclaim the community's socio-economic development, thus enacting a "critical"[97] prefigurative utopianism.

While I have focussed in the second section of this chapter on the example of PTDC – because of how dynamic and contested an experiment it is, and the critical mass of people that participate in it – there are many other Services, and other institutionalised experiments, that similarly base themselves on concretising Auroville's socio-economic ideals. In the same "Service Area" complex that houses PTDC, there is a clothing, linens and tailoring Service, "Nandini," founded in 1994. Just like PTDC, its operational costs are subsidised by the Central Fund, it undertakes bulk purchasing with member contributions, individuals take what they need, and their consumption is tracked.

Another example is the Free Store, situated in between PTDC and Nandini – a centre for donated items that is open for all Aurovilians and Newcomers to take whatever they wish to, free of cost, as the Service's costs of operation are financed by the Central Fund. And in two recent Aurovilian housing projects, Citadines and Sunship, approximately half of the apartments are allocated for free to people with no means, their cost absorbed by premium

[97] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 10.

contributions made by individuals to inhabit the other half, successfully implementing fraternal models for wealth sharing to provide for the basic need of shelter.

Fig. 32. Celebrating community services: the PTDC and Free Store "Fashion Show."[98]

Citizens throughout the world who, by setting up such cooperative community institutions, have participated in "the provision of general interest services not provided by either the market or the government," have been theorised as enacting an "active citizenship."[99] In the context of Auroville, I consider this activism to be prefiguratively utopian, as community members engaged to intentionally shape their society, in the present and for the future, according to the community's socio-economic ideals.

The associations that have developed in this process have evolved from private to public sphere projects, increasing in scale and institutionalisation. As

[98] "PTDC and Free Store Fashion Show 2018," 2016, Photograph, Auroville Outreach Media digital archive.

[99] Mori, "Community and Cooperation," 346.

such they affirm the political potential of enacting what Sargisson terms a "transgressive" utopianism, one that seeks to reformulate the public sphere according to private sphere practices.[100] Retaining their participatory and experimental character, they continue to act as prefigurative spaces in which new, solidary socio-economic relationships are intentionally fostered and effectively concretised, within the community, and even beyond it, as evidenced in PTDC's institutional partnerships.

PTDC manager Anandi points to how critical these kinds of prefigurative institutions, that facilitate the concretisation of Aurovilians' aspirations in everyday community life, are for manifesting Auroville as an enacted utopian community:

> I've seen here so much… goodwill. Where would that goodwill have been expressed if Pour Tous would not have been there? In the supermarket, getting a beer? So not only you create a space where that can happen, it's also – **it invites**. And that for me is very important. If we don't create the space that calls for that, how are we expecting it manifest? In a supermarket? That would be a real miracle![101]

However, it is important to underline again that many Aurovilians remain critical of their socio-economic achievements, as we saw in the case of PTDC, because they consider them to be only partial, and thus even hypocritical in light of the ideals they seek to prefigure. I draw on an observation by Arthur in reconciling these perceptions, which is that "in Sri Aurobindo's definition of a subjective society lies the key of Auroville." Sri Aurobindo described a subjective society as an intermediary stage, a passage from a society governed by ego, to one governed by the divine (gnostic society). In that transitional period, bound to be uncomfortable, people would invent tools, means, frameworks that would contain elements of both – as prefigurative of the gnostic society as possible, but still only

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[100] Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 1.
[101] Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14, 2016.

approximating it.

9 Conclusion

"*So what's the point of utopia?*
The point is this: to keep walking."[1]
Eduardo Galeano.

"*Asking, we walk*." Zapatista slogan.

Through an autoethnographic exploration of the uniquely well-established intentional community Auroville, this thesis defines, and empirically substantiates, a ground-breaking theorisation of prefigurative utopian practice, with significant contributions for both prefigurative and utopian scholarship and experiments. In the first section of this concluding chapter, I specify how my work advances academic conceptualisations of prefigurative and utopian practice, and how this is relevant for their enactment. In the second, I highlight key insights from my ethnographic analysis that I consider to be contextually pertinent, for the on-going project of Auroville. Finally, complementing how undertaking this doctoral research precipitated various forms of engagement with Auroville's ideals (detailed in the second, methodology chapter of this thesis), in the third section I share that it has enabled me to recognise how other community members variously engage with these ideals, and conclude that recognising and affirming such practice, at a collective level, is key to empowering our spiritually prefigurative utopian project.

[1] Translated extract of the poem "Ventana sobre la utopia," first published in Eduardo Galeano, *Las Palabras Andantes* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1993).

9.1 Theoretical Horizons

9.1.1 Occupy Prefiguration

My work reclaims and builds on the early conceptualisation of prefiguration, in considering a broader wealth of practices, not only within, but also beyond political contexts as prefigurative action. To date, the concept of prefiguration has almost exclusively been employed in analysing the political practice of left social movements. While early scholars considered the socio-cultural practices that were enacted alongside political ones such as decision-making to be a part of the prefigurative repertoire, and thus identity, of these movements, in the last decade the former have been discarded from its analytical purview. Only those practices that were directly and strategically enacting another politics – strictly defined as forms of organising and decision-making – were considered to be part of the prefigurative exercise.

I come back to the question my father asked himself as a protestor in the early 1970s: what is the society we are going to build, once we win the revolution? Political practice alone is not going to construct an alternative society, yet the actors of prefigurative politics are driven precisely by the prospect of living in one. By remaining as exclusive as it is today, the conceptualisation and ensuing ethnographic focus of scholarship on prefiguration thus does a disservice to its underlying project and potential. I thus invite fellow scholars to "occupy prefiguration": any practice that is enacting attitudes, modes, and relations with the strategic intention of constructing alternative, utopian societies warrants the definition, one that will enable kindred practices to be collectivised, and empowered as result.

9.1.2 Institutionalising Prefigurative Practice

In examining prefigurative utopian practice in the context of Auroville, a uniquely well-established intentional community, significant points of consideration pertaining to the role of institutionalisation for the perpetuation of alternative constructions of society emerge. Whilst the anarchist ethos and praxis that underlies many alternative movements and practices (prefigurative politics in particular) often explicitly resists trajectories of institutionalisation, Auroville's experience with the latter responds to important critiques and concerns regarding the capacity of radical experiments to establish and maintain viable societal alternatives. Proponents of such experiments – scholars and actors, including Aurovilians (myself included), many of whom share anarchist sensibilities and who thus may find Auroville's institutionalisation to be problematic – must therefore give this aspect of Auroville's evolution due theoretical consideration.

In light of my research, I argue that the institutionalisation of Auroville does not necessarily have to counteract its prefigurative nature. Rather, it compels us to consider the revolutionary notion that establishing institutions may be part of a stage in the process of prefiguring an alternative society that ensures their perpetuation, when this institutionalisation retains a prefigurative character: when its organisation facilitates the social reproduction of desired alternative social relations, and when it remains experimental, and therefore flexible and responsive to evolution.

In Auroville, such institutionalisation may even be prefigurative of an alternative (to the) state. Sri Aurobindo has said "The State is bound to act crudely . . . It is incapable of that free, harmonious . . . varied action which is proper to

organic groups."[2] In "Prefiguring the State," while Davina Cooper recognises that "For many scholars, radical change cannot emerge from (or within) the state but only from 'outside'; and it is the presence or potential for an outside which is key,"[3] she argues that there is room, alongside left state critiques, for a "prefigurative conceptualisation"[4] of the state that "reimagines what statehood could mean" and "rejects a sharp distinction between states and other political governance formations."[5]

Among the three features of a prefigurative state she proposes is embeddedness in everyday relations, in which the roles of administrators and beneficiaries overlap and are entangled, enabling "a multiplicity of informal junctures and networks," through which policies may be "advanced, transformed, gutted, enabled and thwarted"[6] through a rhizomatic "stretching out, activating, and incorporating" of members of a polity and their projects in a "constantly evolving governmental form."[7]

I recognise Auroville's mode of governance within these descriptions. My ethnographic research reveals that policies are proposed, criticised, protested, ignored, reworked, and amended by overlapping groupings of community members virtually continuously. Importantly, this 'embedded' nature remains unchallenged by the current shift in political organisation in Auroville, uncovered in my analysis, from a direct democratic towards something more akin to a representative democratic model. The latter observation is an important one for a

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[2] Sri Aurobindo, qtd. in David C., "How to govern Utopia."

[3] Davina Cooper, "Prefiguring the State," Antipode 49, no. 2 (2017): 337, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12277.

[4] Cooper, "Prefiguring the State," 339.

[5] Cooper, "Prefiguring the State," 339.

[6] Cooper, "Prefiguring the State," 345.

[7] Cooper, "Prefiguring the State," 343-344.

consideration of what modes of governance are able to embody features of a prefigurative state.

My theorisation of the "subjectively objective" nature of Auroville's current administrative praxis also contributes to Cooper's important exploratory conceptualisation of a prefigurative state. Policies abound in the community's collective organisation at present, pointing to a Weberian process of bureaucratisation, the trappings of which Auroville is not immune to, notably its formulaic nature. This limits the "free," "various," and therefore arguably prefigurative praxis of governance described by Sri Aurobindo,[8] whether in the context of a Residents' Assembly gathering such as the Selection Process, or the decision-making of an administrative group. Yet, in the "subjectively objective" articulation of this bureaucratisation enacted in Auroville – critical, flexible, and responsive to subjective perceptions – lays prefigurative potential for an alternative practice of (and/or to) state administration.

9.1.3 Prefiguring Utopianism, Spiritualising Utopianism

In this thesis, I use the concept of prefiguration as an analytical lens through which the nature of Auroville's utopian praxis is analysed, assessing whether and how its practices attempt to strategically embody, and in so doing propel, an evolution towards the community's ideals. I found that the lens of prefiguration was particularly adapted to understanding utopian practice in the context of Auroville because the latter articulates with a prefigurative conceptualisation (and not a fixed vision) of the future, through experimental praxis.

[8] Qtd. in David C., "How to govern Utopia."

Davina Cooper highlights that prefigurative conceptualisation, just like prefigurative practice, must be both reflexive and provisional.[9] Each are key to the on-going enactment of an evolutionary praxis of utopianism, particularly in an established 'alternative' society such as Auroville, because they enable such praxis to be engaged in a learning process, what the *Auroville Charter* describes as "unending education."

This process of learning, or education, is not only related to concrete utopian practice – what works or doesn't work in terms of the practical application of utopian ideals – but, as both the utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch, and utopian social theorist Ruth Levitas have highlighted, to the very nature of utopianism itself. Bloch described it as "learning hope,"[10] Levitas as the education of desire for a better way of life[11]; The Mother as a "thirst for progress."[12] For The Mother, both the thirst and the progress were of a spiritual nature, which Ruth Levitas suggests is central to utopianism itself:

> If Utopia is understood as the expression of the desire for a better way of being, then it is perhaps a (sometimes) secularised version of the spiritual quest.[13]

Among the key contributions of this thesis is an ethnographic account of how a spiritual quest underlies, strategically articulates, and sustains a prefigurative utopian project. Auroville is an intentional community that is not conceptually or practically dissociated from the challenges and potentialities of the conditions in which it is embedded, but predicates itself on the incorporation of these challenges, and their transformation through spiritualisation, wherein lies co-existing, latent potential.

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[9] Cooper, "Prefiguring the State."
[10] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3
[11] Levitas, *Utopia as Method*.
[12] Satprem, *Mother's Agenda, Volume 9*, 65.
[13] Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 13.

9.2 Contextually Grounded Hopes

This autoethnographic account offers insight into how Aurovilians have articulated with, and sought to embed, Auroville's ideals into the development of the community, in the face of various limitations, over its considerable 50-year history. This is a process that many newer members of the community, even ones such as myself who were born and raised within it, are largely unaware of. When I re-joined Auroville as an adult member, and became aware of how challenging it was to engage in, sustain, and carry forward this 'utopian' community project, I had a new, and incredulous, appreciation for all those who had participated in fostering the (in my case utopian) environment of my childhood. In familiarising others with this process, I hope this thesis will increase appreciation for its exacting nature, both in terms of complexity and dedication, as well as embolden fellow community members to persevere, in the face of the challenges that they will encounter. I also believe that we would be enriched by complementary research into how individual Aurovilians in various demographic groupings relate to, and embody, our ideals – beyond our own prevalent focus on Auroville's pioneers,[14] and the growing interest in generations raised in Auroville.[15]

In an increasingly bureaucratised and institutionalised context, this thesis makes a case for continued experimentation. In light of the successful accounts of how small-scale experiments progressed to becoming embedded into Auroville's communal organisation, and the significant hurdles that were overcome for such embeddedness to be achieved, I hope that Aurovilians (especially those that are newer to the community, or came of age in this phase of formalisation) will be

[14] Devin, *Turning Points*; Fred Cebron "The Mother: an inner story by Auroville pioneers," video interview series, last accessed 13 Sep, 2019, https://vimeo.com/user3896456.

[15] Auroville Video Productions, "Children of Auroville"; Clarence-Smith et al., *Auroville Education Survey*.

struck by the potential of such experimentation – even in their 'private' individual spheres – for prefiguring change in the 'public' collective sphere of Aurovilian society, and galvanised to sustain this process.[16] The power to shape and transform our society lies in such engagement. In transferring such expectations – and responsibility – onto our Working Groups, we both disempower our polity and unfairly burden our public servants. We must understand that the role of our current administrative apparatus is, primarily, to meet the organisational needs of a community our size and growing.

Some of the Working Groups I observed were engaging with Auroville's ideals while doing so, enacting a "subjectively objective" administrative practice which itself seeks to prefigurative the principles of a "subjectivised" society. Such practice would benefit from being reflected in communications with the community, and centred in our overarching discourse on administration, so that the prefigurative potential it contains can be appraised, upheld, and advanced. In the face of increased formalisation, encouraging an anarchic and subjective 'utopian treatment' of the artefacts of this process (i.e. policies) is critical to an on-going spiritually prefigurative political praxis. Calling our policies "guidelines" is not going to achieve this.

The dissatisfaction with and disengagement from our current, participatory exercise of political organisation and practice may, as I have suggested in this thesis, for some point to a failing of the mode. However, instead of reverting towards representative forms and tools of democracy, it would behove us – for the sake of the project of horizontal organising, which has been taken up by many other collectives – to first try addressing that which currently cripples our

[16] What Sargisson would describe as "transgressive" utopian practice. See Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 11

collective decision-making forums. This could take the form of experimenting with and empowering various scales and formats of engagement, developing protocols of personal and interpersonal conduct, [17] and introducing measures of accountability for process duration and outcomes.

9.3 Personal Reformulations

Many of the experiences of undertaking field research for this thesis, as well as the specific insights and conclusions it yields, have defied my own expectations. I was not sure whether, let alone how much, our ideals were being articulated and embodied in our community praxis. I was not cognisant of the fact that the figures and works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo continued to be so influential, in much deeper ways than the wielding of statements for the legitimation of personal views. I did not think I would end up questioning the very merit of horizontal forms of political organising, suggesting that bureaucracy and institutionalisation might have prefigurative potential, or advancing the notion of a government-enabled anarchy. Being open to such stance-defying outcomes required its own form of "subjective objectivity" – a willingness to reformulate my own subjective, previously unquestioned preconceptions through a sincere and rigorous research process.

The latter deepened existing relationships, understandings of, and engagement in areas of community life familiar to me, and exposed me to spheres and individuals in and with which I had little or no prior connection. This decentred and unsettled – sometimes uncomfortably – my personal

[17] For this we may draw inspiration from new indigenous social movements that centre embodied, and spiritual attitudes and practices, such as that of "kapu aloha" in the currently on-going Protect Mauna Kea demonstration in Hawai'i. See Protect Mauna Kea, https://www.protectmaunakea.net, accessed Sep 13, 2019.

understandings of what constituted articulating our ideals. As a researcher, I could not allow myself to be identified with these. While I experienced what I perceived to be various levels of disengagement from such a process, which was disappointing, and in some cases even felt like a betrayal of our collective commitment, I also gained a much more complex and multifaceted understanding of the multiplicity of ways in which we Aurovilians attempt to prefigure these ideals in our community.

This reflexive and evolving process of reformulating my own perspectives and understandings by "occupying" Aurovilian others' has allowed me to identify such articulations where I failed to before, simply because they were so foreign to me. I am certain that many oversights remain, and I look forward to continuing to deepen my experience of and within Auroville in this regard. I am also certain that while it is important to be aware of and to address our shortcomings, recognising and affirming the ways in which we *do* enact and embody Auroville's ideals is what will empower our individual and collective capacity to.

> Take the psychic attitude; follow the straight sunlit path, with the Divine openly or secretly upbearing you – if secretly, he will yet show himself in good time, – do not insist on the hard, hampered, roundabout and difficult journey.[18] (Sri Aurobindo).

[18] Sri Aurobindo, *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 32, *The Mother with Letters on The Mother* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2012), 94.

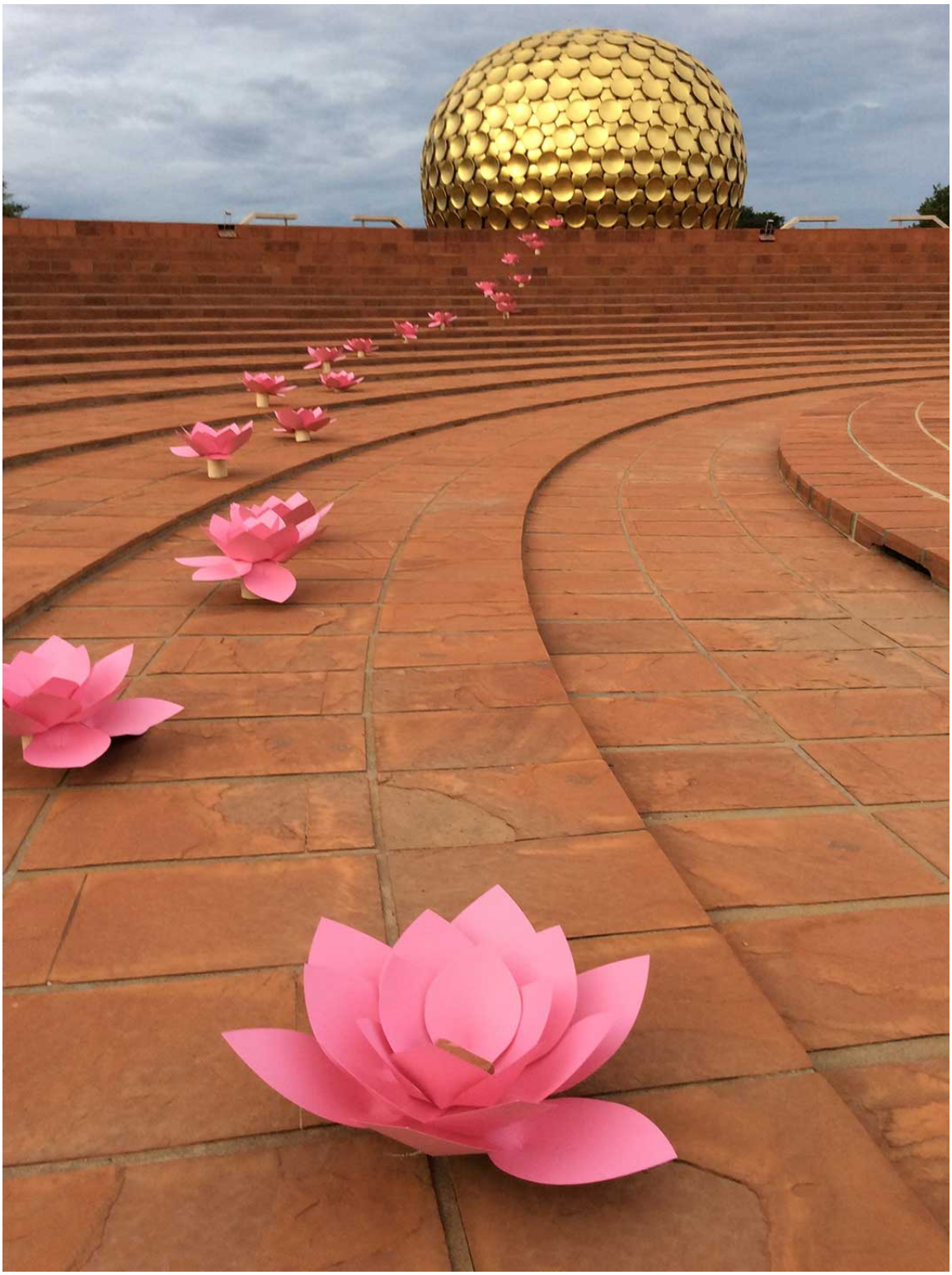

Fig. 33. Lotus decorations at the Matrimandir.[35]

[35] Manohar_Auroville, "Preparing decorations for 15-8-2018," Flickr accessed Oct 15, 2018, https://www.flickr.com/photos/manohar_auroville/albums/72157697043492592.

APPENDIX

A: A Dream[1]

There should be somewhere on earth a place which no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings of goodwill who have a sincere aspiration could live freely as citizens of the world and obey one single authority, that of the supreme Truth; a place of peace, concord and harmony where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his sufferings and miseries, to surmount his weaknesses and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and the concern for progress would take precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the search for pleasure and material enjoyment. In this place, children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their souls; education would be given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts but to enrich existing faculties and bring forth new ones. In this place, titles and positions would be replaced by opportunities to serve and organise; the bodily needs of each one would be equally provided for, and intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority would be expressed in the general organisation not by an increase in the pleasures and powers of life but by increased duties and responsibilities. Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, would be equally 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 or financial position. For 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.

The earth is certainly not ready to realise such an ideal, for mankind does not yet possess sufficient knowledge to understand and adopt it nor the conscious force that is indispensable in order to execute it; that is why I call it a dream.

And yet this dream is in the course of becoming a reality; that is what we are striving for in Sri Aurobindo's Ashram, on a very small scale, in proportion to our limited means. The realisation is certainly far from perfect, but it is progressive; little by little we are advancing towards our goal which we hope we may one day be able to present to the world as a practical and effective way to emerge from the present chaos, to be born into a new life that is more harmonious and true.

[1] The Mother, *A Dream,* 1954.

B: Auroville Charter[2]

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 realisations.
4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity.

[2] The Mother, *The Auroville Charter*, 1968.

C: To Be a True Aurovilian[3]

1. The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.

2. 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 and ambitions. The fulfilment of one's desires bars the way to the inner discovery which can only be achieved in the peace and transparency of perfect disinterestedness.

3. The Aurovilian should lose the sense of personal possession. For our passage in the material world, what is indispensable to our life and to our action is put at our disposal according to the place we must occupy. The more we are consciously in contact with our inner being, the more are the exact means given to us.

4. 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 let the consciousness organise a bit of matter by means of one's body is very good. To establish order around oneself helps to bring order within oneself. One should organise one's life not according to outer and artificial rules, but according to an organised inner consciousness, for if one lets life go on without subjecting it to the control of the higher consciousness, it becomes fickle and inexpressive. It is to waste one's time in the sense that matter remains without any conscious utilisation.

5. The whole earth must prepare itself for the advent of the new species, and Auroville wants to work consciously to hasten this advent.

6. Little by little it will be revealed to us what this new species must be, and meanwhile the best course is to consecrate oneself entirely to the Divine.

[3] The Mother, *To Be A True Aurovilian*, 1971.

D: Material Conditions for living in Auroville

1. People living in Auroville are expected to contribute to the collective welfare in work, kind and/or money. Essentially Aurovilians should give their full time and energy to Auroville by practicing Karma Yoga.

2. All activities, productive or service-oriented, must be part of the overall Auroville framework. All financial transactions should take place through the official channels of Auroville.

3. Lands, buildings, houses and other immovable assets are all the collective property of Auroville, and no claims of private possession or ownership can be made by anyone, whether an occupant or a donor. All the land that an applicant or her/his family owns in the master -plan area of Auroville needs to be disclosed.

4. Disputes among members will be solved without violence and within the community. No court cases amongst Aurovilians are allowed.

5. The laws of the Government of India must be respected by people that come from abroad and by Indian citizens as well. People coming from abroad must have a valid passport and valid Entry Visa, P.I.O. or O.C.I. Foreigners and Indian citizens apply to join Auroville on the basis of being Honorary Voluntary Workers.

6. According to Indian law as well as the guidance of the Mother, drugs are not allowed in Auroville.

7. There is no religion in Auroville.

8. Applicants do not come to Auroville for any personal economical gain, as a retirement plan, or as a way to get a visa to be in India or to provide alternative schooling for their children.

I agree and I am informed,

Signature:_____Date:_____

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