

## LOSING FAITH IN FAITH: A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF THE YOUTH IN AUROVILLE

CARISSA DEVINE

*Fulbright Scholar, Studied at SACAR, 2009-2010*

*Editor's Note:* As part of her Fulbright research-study experience in India, Carissa Devine studied 'Fundamentals of Sri Aurobindo's Social Philosophy' and 'Transpersonal & Philosophical Research Methods' at SACAR. She lived and worked at Auroville where she conducted her fieldwork and research to learn about the experiences of youth at Auroville. A brief report and analysis of her findings and observations is documented in this article.

Auroville was created to be a laboratory, a laboratory for individuals to voluntarily experiment with the possibility of human unity. It set out to hasten a new race. This new race, this spiritually transformed race, is ultimately necessary for Auroville to exist as it demands a self-realized ethic, or a high sense of dignity that is unrecognizable in most humans thus far. Auroville has not reached where it is supposed to be, and despair is a constant threat to its citizens, especially to its own children. Children are amenable; they are curious and teachable. That being said, they are a vivid reflection of the living culture in which they grow. But instead of having faith in Auroville, it seems that most of its offspring are barely holding on to hope. The youth of Auroville have been imbued with an unnameable understanding of Auroville; they are its most honest critics, and given their unique insight into the community, their developing apathy should be of great concern. Integrating the input of Auroville's youth is not only a critical part of Auroville's self-conscious evolution, but also to the livelihood of its collective spirit, the essence of the subjective city-of-the future.

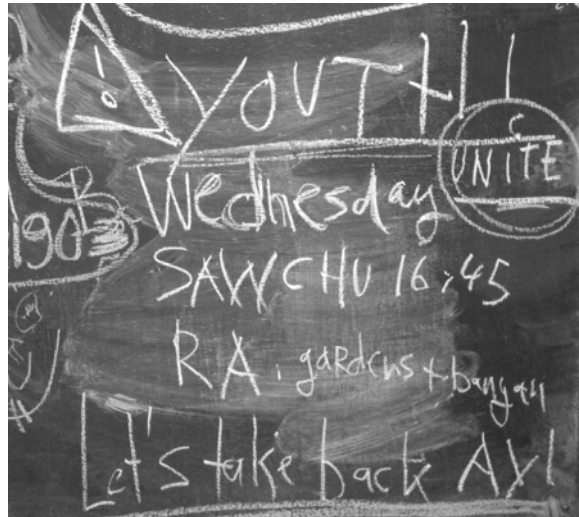
Faith has been, in the age of individualism and reason, dismissed to be religious rhetoric. On the one hand, the rationalist threw the baby out with the bath water when he dismissed faith as antiquated next to his hard science; on the other hand, reason usurped the blind faith that the religious conventions once held. But this faith in reason came to a serious point of reconsideration in the post World War II era; after all, if science, reason, and progress were the new gods, and world war was the kingdom achieved, then perhaps this faith was misplaced. Hence the hippie revolution of the 1960s, and the public announcement of the philosophical "Death of God" on the cover of the April 8, 1966 issue of *Time* magazine. Reflecting on this transitional period, American postmodern philosopher Jeffrey Robbins wrote, "Either religious language had lost its meaning, or even worse, the inherited meanings had grown perverse in the wake of a long list of modern atrocities" (Robbins, 2). The metaphysical truths once assumed to be true, whether it was in God the Father or Reason the God, could no longer be accepted. At this point, humanity had to find something else in which she could place her trust for a meaningful and purposeful life.

In the chapter entitled, "Conditions for the Coming of a Spiritual Age," Sri Aurobindo wrote, "There will be a labour of religion to reject its past heavy weight of dead matter and revivify its strength in the fountains of the spirit" (*The Human Cycle*, 249). This movement is reflected in the response of contemporary philosophy and theology to the Death of God theologies, announced first by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century, and to the public in 1966—namely, a "Return to Religion [without religion]". This wave of thought is an attempt to re-interpret the scriptures of old with perverted and spiritual insights in place of the traditional views. One of the key elements in this movement is faith; after all, once Truth with a

capital T has been dismissed, that which remains are multiple, even countless truths. The world is, as Nietzsche claimed, nothing more than individual fables. In the midst of this Babel-like pluralism, faith in something meaningful is essential if the individual is not to be swallowed by the human curse of futility. For Sri Aurobindo, it is at this point, wherein subjective truths are given the faith and respect once reserved exclusively for the objective, metaphysical truth, that the human being's saving gift of idealism, born from her capacity to consciously adapt and improve her situation, becomes indispensable (*ibid.*, 61-62). This freedom for creative subjective development, and the faith therein, is the core of spirituality.

This respect for subjectivity is a necessary byproduct of the age of individualism. Sri Aurobindo notes two articles of faith within the creed of reason; namely, the awareness to constantly adapt and improve one's situation and the faith that one can always carry this out, and secondly, that my reason always trumps the other's (*ibid.*, 121-122). Therefore, the resulting lesson from the clash of individual gods in the age of individualism is the indispensable need to live and work together. The genesis of Auroville is an embodiment of this crusade as it attempted to give practical form to this new radical subjective thought. "We were so full of faith," said Shyama. "There we were all building the new world; what could be more fun? Of course we were immensely ignorant and naïve, but that was wonderful, we were engaging in what we felt was meaningful work" (Devin, 77). Unfortunately, this faith and idealism has been diluted through the ensuing generations in Auroville. Despite Auroville's attempt to bring the kingdom of God to earth, away from its heavenly realm of the past, its mix of genuine efforts and hypocrisy has challenged its youth to maintain a bona fide conviction in its work. In an interview regarding the youth's awareness of the underlying philosophical principles of Auroville, one of the individuals deeply involved in Future School remarked that this topic becomes, "tricky with a lot of the teenagers because they hear, unfortunately, a lot of the adults, 'Mother this...Mother said...In Auroville we should...Because of the ideals,' or whatever. They hear this, and then what they see people doing is very different, often. And of course they see the hypocrisy, no?" (Interview conducted on March 1, 2010). It is no surprise, then, that bringing up such ideas for class discussion or mere conversation and reflection is met with a "rolling of the eyes."

Sadly, many young people in Auroville believe that their voices are silenced, that they do not stand a chance at really having a say in Auroville's decisions simply because they are not on the side of those who hold the power to make decisions. At the Residents' Assembly Service's meeting with the youth, preparing for a City Planning Workshop, this frustration was voiced candidly. One of the individuals that attended, who has lived in Auroville since he was a small boy, commented, "The old won't let go, they won't let the youth make their mistakes...Workshops and dialogue seem futile, we have done this. It is something bigger. We have gone through this process and the stubborn dogmatic attitudes stay...Even if you have six months training [to join an influential committee], they dogmatize you; if you don't understand like them, you're out!" Instead of feeling empowered and encouraged to express their creative will, they are feeling the weight of bureaucracy, a deadly stagnation for any society. Another individual, who was born in Auroville, and was present at this meeting, stated, "You can't sit in meetings if you don't have money. With money, you can sit in, suggest projects, give money to help manifest those projects, etc. It's unfair, and yet, to make money is taboo." As a result, many are reluctant to participate in meetings and gatherings as they do not want to waste their time with the "useless discussion," which was made evident by the light attendance at this meeting of less than twenty representatives from the youth. All of this, in turn, further deteriorates the unity of the youth. "There is never a youth unity....There is no ground for the youth to enter [Auroville]. One needs money," said another.<sup>1</sup>



*A posting at Youth Centre in attempt to get more youth to participate in community decisions*

So what is different today? How did the tenacity, faith and idealism, those precious saving gifts of humanity, from only forty-two years ago become so watered down? To start with, it seems like there was an unfair and naïve expectation of how the children of Auroville ought to be, not to mention a disconcerting taste of the “sacred egoism” of which Sri Aurobindo warns against (*ibid.*, 313). Consider, for instance, Munuandi’s reminiscent remark in the documentary “*The Children of Auroville: The Early Years*” (Neemberry, 2009): “We had people tell us stories, ‘You’re the gifted children. You’re the chosen ones. That kind of stuff. So it made us feel like the academic side of life wasn’t that important. So, be free and do what you want, you’re Auroville’s children, no matter what.” This hope is also evident in the comments from The Mother in the beginning of Auroville. She mentioned on several occasions the heightened sense of consciousness in Aurovilian children. For example, “The children, the little children who are only a few months old (as I said, those who are born in Auroville) are remarkable—they’re remarkable. I thought it was just one case, but all those whom I have seen so far, all: a concentration of consciousness” (AM X-456-457; also see AM X-37, AM XI-134-135, and AM XI-397).<sup>ii</sup> However, when asked whether or not the children of Auroville will be the “intermediate beings,” she replies, “I don’t know,” and then remarks that Auroville is quite far from its ideal (MA XII-37).

The Mother affirms that there is a powerful possibility for conscious evolution in children. She said, “I really think that those who can begin the new race are among children. Men are crusted over” (MA XII-58). At the same time, she is quite frank about her reluctance in naming them the intermediate beings:

But almost all of them [the Aurovilian children] are conscious beings. And the parents are absolutely stupid in their manner of behaving with them, because they don’t know, they don’t understand. I saw one again today...and I saw the consciousness inside him, it’s wonderful! And then they treat him like a little animal—he has no means of self defense (AM XI-397).

That being said, there should be no surprise that the Aurovilian youth are still struggling with the human condition, as were their parents. But the pioneering generation had the encouragement and blessings of The Mother to start anew, whereas the Aurovilian children are

expected to oblige to their parents' aims and ideals. The children of Auroville lack those precious blessings given by The Mother, that priceless experience of recognition and inspiration.

Without The Mother here to inspire directly, this responsibility is passed to the parents and the community itself. This responsibility, it seems, has been neglected, and it is reflected clearly in the two general opinions regarding the youth of Auroville, neither of which promote a healthy dose of subjective idealism. To start, the youth of Auroville are not the enlightened beings that were seemingly hoped for, and so the youth are regarded as "lost" and are merely tolerated within the community. On the flip side, others regard them as the answer to Auroville's struggles and propose or hope for a youthful revolution. In response to the first opinion, rejecting the youth is a sign of lacking the basic respect and dignity required in a subjective age. In regard to the second response, the hope for a youthful revolution, such an act would only keep Auroville in a cycle of individualist revolutions, wherein the younger generation constantly replaces the truth of the old with their new truth, never learning to respect the view of the other. This also is in disagreement with the social ethic of the subjective age since this age "...will hold sacred all the different parts of man's life which correspond to the parts of his being, all his physical, vital, dynamic, emotional, aesthetic, ethical, intellectual, psychic evolution, and see in them instruments for growth towards a diviner living" (*The Human Cycle*, 227).

"I think life is experience. Everyone has to go through different stages. By progressing and improving myself, by learning from my mistakes, to have my own opinion, thoughts, emotions, and share..."

~A 16-year-old Aurovilian's response to,  
"What is the aim or purpose of life?"

In spite of the lack of faith in the project of Auroville itself amongst the youth, there is a basic ethic of experience and progress that seems to have been instilled. Most kids in Auroville consider experience and progress as the ultimate purpose in life, and there is an open mind when it comes to pursuing one's own spiritual path. These are the Aurovilian characteristics that the parents should be celebrating and harnessing rather than complaining about their parties, their lack of discipline, and their incessant music. Furthermore, citing The Mother or Sri Aurobindo at any point to ridicule the youth while they pursue their own path of development is not only narrow-minded, but it is an attribute of fundamentalism that has plagued the development of religions time and time again. "A religious movement brings usually a wave of spiritual excitement and aspiration that communicates itself to a large number of individuals and there is as a result a temporary uplifting and an effective formation, partly spiritual, partly ethical, partly dogmatic in its nature," wrote Sri Aurobindo concerning the advent and progress of the spiritual age. "But the wave after a generation or two or at most a few generations begins to subside; the formation remains" (*ibid.*, 263-264). If Auroville wants to stay true to its authentic religious pursuit, which is spiritual and distinct from the religionism which Sri Aurobindo admonishes against, Auroville ought to be more concerned about its conscious evolution, not dogmatizing written texts of the past, whether it is through strict architectural planning or unforgiving codes of conduct. Authentic aspiration is essential, not the hollow formation of preconceived and stagnant expectations.

“To me, spirituality is not a religion. Many people make it into a religion and that is stupid. Spirituality is something that takes a lot of work and I think that many people think they are spiritual just because they wear white clothes and chant ‘OM’ every morning. Spirituality, in my opinion, has to do with really letting go of all these extra characteristics and finding a true core of one’s personality. I think that each person can also find their own way of finding that and meditation and happy thoughts are not the only way.”

~ A 15-year-old Aurovilian response to,  
“What does spirituality mean to you?”

If Auroville wants to pass on that magical faith of idealism and aspiration, that which Sri Aurobindo names as the saving grace of the human, that faith which is still apparent in some of the eyes of the pioneers (although sometimes you have to look really hard, pass the disheartened toil and into that spark that refuses to leave), it should concern itself with cultivating this ardor in its youth. This must begin with a certain level of respect, which can be shown by listening to their concerns for the community in all of its issues of organization and execution and providing the space and facilities for them to grow as much as possible. While the latter has come a far distance since Auroville’s inception, especially the opportunities for education, simple space to live—and most importantly, the opportunity to learn to live together—is an imminent problem for the youth of Auroville. Moreover, the former issue named is perhaps of greater concern, and it is the topic that receives the least amount of attention. Children are constantly referred to as the ones worthy for the kingdom of God, even by the Mother when she names men as “too crusted over.” If Auroville wants to give rise to a community soul that is subjective and distinct from the ways of the past, it should consider empowering and integrating the voices of the younger generations in its decisions for organization so that it can remain truly dynamic with the changing circumstances.

Since 1999, the minors in Auroville have made up nearly one quarter of its population. In the 2002 Tally (Consensus, [www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org)), there were 134 teenagers living in Auroville between the ages of thirteen and nineteen, and 174 between the ages of five and twelve. This means that there are (or that there should at least be an expectation of and facilities for) about 300 Aurovilian adolescents and young adults between the ages of thirteen and twenty-seven. Contrast these numbers to the space provided for youth living: Kailash, a housing project for 12 individuals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one; WDK, which provides for 6 individuals between the ages of twenty and thirty, roughly; and Youth Centre, which houses less than 10 individuals. The difference in these numbers says a lot about the lack of concern with reference to the youth of Auroville.

In response, Auroville should encourage and support its youth to embark on living projects such as the ones just named, which teaches them how to live freely and independently and, at the same time, in a community, which teaches the necessary rules of organization and respect for others that ensue. While this intent does seem to be at the core of these projects, it is only accepted so long as it complies with the demands of the older Aurovilians, which sends a message of disrespect and disregard. Consider, for example, the simple fact that Kailash, housing a dozen adolescents, was planted directly next to the community Silence; or, for another example, that the Youth Centre is, perhaps symbolically, at odds with Master Plan as the Crown

Road is supposed to cut directly through it. For a final case in point, talk to Velu or Segar about their own ambitions in providing more space for the youth to live. The recent housing project, Muyerchi (in Surrender Community), which was initiated by the two of them, took seven years to complete after it was met with resistance from both L'avenir and the community. These examples demonstrate the lack of concern given to these youth projects, which should be one of the top priorities. Auroville should pursue projects like these, but with more awareness and foresight. It is foolish to expect the youth of Auroville to maintain a high level of respect for its intentions of spiritual pursuit for a new and better way to live together when, in reality, they feel both judged and ignored. Therefore, not only should there be many more living projects for the youth so that they can learn to be more aware of what is demanded of the individual when she lives in a community, but they should also be given the freedom to explore this without the heavy preconditions and judgments from their elders. Projects such as these could help cultivate the awareness and skills necessary for a more subjective society, and including these fresh voices in Auroville's already existing committees, such as the Auroville Council, the Working Committee and L'avenir could contribute a lot. Or they could consider having a Youth Council, a representative group wherein the youth could voice their concerns for the development of their community and to look out for their right to develop freely. Including the input of the youth into a community's organization, despite the lack of consistency it may have with the current mindset, could open new ways of thinking about the community, contributing a dynamism that is essential to any progressive community.



*Photo credit: [www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org)*

The succeeding generations of Auroville compose a critical part of its collective soul, which is, according to Sri Aurobindo, much more of an essential concern for a spiritual society than any physical formation. The spiritual society will be concerned with genuine spirituality. "Spirituality respects the freedom of the human soul," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "because it is itself fulfilled by freedom and the deepest meaning of freedom is the power to expand and grow towards perfection by the law of one's own nature, dharma" (*The Human Cycle*, 181). To live in this way, embracing one's own freedom while also respecting the other's, is the divine perfection. Realizing this ethic "can only be brought about by an individual change in each human life. The collective soul is there only as a great half-subconscious source of the individual existence; if it is to take on a definite psychological form or a new kind of collective life, that can only come by the shaping growth of its individuals," insisted Sri Aurobindo. "As will be the spirit and life of the individuals constituting it, so will be the realised spirit of the collectivity and the true power of its life. A society that lives not by its men but by its institutions, is not a collective soul, but a machine; its life becomes a mechanical product and ceases to be a living growth" (*ibid.*, 263). Providing for the growth of the youth in the right ways, thereby shaping a healthy community soul, should be at the forefront of Auroville's plan, which should always remain dynamic. The real difference in conscious evolution should be the tenacity and faith for meaningful progress imbued in the succeeding generations, not in clinging to a forty-year-old

master plan.

There is an unnameable Aurovilian quality that permeates the youth. They have a unique understanding of Auroville; they have not come to know Auroville through its ideals, which was the in the hearts of both the pioneers and is in the hearts of newcomers, but instead through its realities. They are not disillusioned. They are the most honest critics of Auroville, and self-reflection and self-criticism are essential for self-progress. If Auroville continues to allow for this feeling of disconnect with its youth, they will lose an essential, and maybe even necessary voice in shaping its future. For these children, Auroville will simply be home, a place with familiar faces (a mindset that is already starting to be noticeable), rather than a platform for finding new and better ways to live together. If the city-of-the-future wants to sustain itself, its primary concern should be with its collective spirit and whether or not that spirit is able to recognize and inspire, both individuals and the world. The most disillusioned and direct representation of this spirit can be seen in its children, and if their faith in Auroville continues to dissipate, their aspiration and idealism will be lost. This is the saving grace that Sri Aurobindo praised, and if it has no place even in the children of Auroville, then Auroville ought to reconsider its approach.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> This statement is also addressing another concern for Auroville, which is most commonly referred to as the “retiree community.” It is next to impossible for Auroville to welcome fresh youth into its community seeing as it does not have the facilities nor the funds to provide for its residents as is. That being the case, it is much easier for older individuals who have the finances to support themselves to make the transition into Auroville, giving Auroville more and more older residents each year.

<sup>ii</sup> References for Mother’s passages are taken from the text, “Mother on Auroville: References in Mother’s Agenda,” printed at the Auroville Press, but with no named editor or date. The citations that look like, MA XIII-212 or AMIX-101 stand for Mother’s Agenda, with the Roman numeral indicating the volume number, and the last number the page. ‘AM’ is the abbreviating for “L’Agenda de Mère” and is used for the volumes not yet published in English at the time of this text’s publication. A provisional translation was given by the editor.