

SPIRITUAL IDEALS AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF AUROVILLE:
A TRANSDISCIPLINARY INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

by

Bindu Mohanty

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read SPIRITUAL IDEALS AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF AUROVILLE: A TRANSPERSONAL INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY by Bindu Mohanty, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria of approving a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Humanities with a Concentration in East-West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies.

Jorge N. Ferrer, Ph.D, Chair

Department Chair, East-West Psychology

Daniel Deslauriers, Ph.D

Full Professor, East-West Psychology

Karen T. Litfin

Professor, University of Washington

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical and qualitative study explores the relationship between spiritual ideals and the social psychology of the transpersonally-oriented community of Auroville. Located in rural south India, Auroville is a growing international town based on the spiritual vision of the philosopher-sage Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950). Founded in 1968 by Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator, the Mother (*née* Mirra Alfassa), Auroville's primary mission is to aid the spiritual evolution and transformation of the world by manifesting a spiritual society. This evolutionary vision, which gives the community its transpersonal orientation, comprises a number of spiritual ideals that have inspired people to join Auroville.

The dissertation uses interpretive qualitative research methodology to determine the spiritual ideals that are individually held by the residents of Auroville, and the relationship between the spiritual ideals and the following facets of the social psychology of Auroville: the dialectic between the individual and the collective; challenges and inspirations that arise for individuals as they relate to the community; and potential collective shadow issues. A community-wide survey, researcher's observations, archival data, individual as well as focus-group interviews were the means of data collection.

A transdisciplinary approach that engages theoretically with the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and transpersonal psychology was adopted in the analysis and interpretation of data. The analysis reveals how Aurovilians, inspired by their transpersonal ideals, struggle to transcend their personal, socially constructed identity to embrace a wider and more comprehensive sense of self. Research findings indicate that, as an experimental society, Auroville offers an alternative to mainstream society, particularly in the social aspects of work and organization. Both in its ideals and in its development, Auroville is characterized by the evolutionary processes of self-organization, differentiation, unity, and random fluctuations that allow for the emergence of novel structures. By analyzing the positive effect of Auroville's spiritual ideals on its population, this dissertation demonstrates the power of human imagination in furthering the development of societies. The study concludes that Auroville, despite the numerous social and developmental challenges, is an evolving postsecular and spiritual society.

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It was January 1st, 2005. I woke up shivering in an unfamiliar room. As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I remembered that I had arrived here from Auroville, half-way across the world, only hours ago in the midst of a rain-shower. I was clear on my goal—I wanted to work at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) on this research project that had gripped me.

But the path did not promise to be easy—in mid-life, I had launched myself and my partner into an unknown adventure (both of us being penniless and strangers to the area). As Karlheinz slept, peacefully enough, next to me, I sat in the dark taking stock of our situation. When dawn broke through, dispelling the last withering remnants of the night, the new light of a new year revealed something that I had never witnessed before: Across the bay, framing the famed bridges of the Bay Area was the covenant of a double rainbow—not one, but two rainbows lit up the gray skies. I knew then—knew with my heart—that this journey was meant to be.

My deepest gratitude goes out to the Energy that sustains us as the Universe. I am grateful for its guidance in my life and in the writing of this dissertation. All that has given love and meaning to my life, I cherish as unique forms of this universal Energy. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the unconditional support of my loved ones—my parents, brothers, and Karlheinz—in all of my endeavors.

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DEDICATION

For all those who love adventure

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: THE CITY OF HUMAN UNITY

Background to Auroville

Auroville, an international settlement in south India, is a unique social and spiritual experiment in human unity that has been recognized as such by both the United Nations and the Government of India since its inception.¹ One hundred and twenty-five nations participated in Auroville's inauguration on February 28, 1968 with 63 of them sending a delegation, comprising a young boy and a girl. The remaining nations were represented by Indian youth. At the foundation ceremony each pair carried a placard bearing the name of the country they represented, and in a container some earth (or substitute soil from India) from that country. Each of these delegations in turn ceremoniously walked up a ramp to pour the soil into a lotus-shaped ceramic urn, while Auroville's Charter was read out first by its founder, the Mother (*née* Mirra Alfassa) in French and then in 16 different languages. This was the symbolic beginning of a city that, according to its Charter, belonged to humanity as whole and was dedicated to the realization of an "actual human unity" (Alfassa, 1980, p. 200).

The site chosen for Auroville was once a barren, deserted plateau. But now it has been transformed into lush green environs. About 2,000 people from 40 different countries and cultures have made Auroville their home, and in doing so have created a vibrant small town that bustles with various activities. And yet Auroville is a place that escapes easy definitions. It describes itself as a "universal city in the making" (Auroville, n.d.) and aims to be a city for 50,000 people, but currently, in terms of its population, Auroville is not much bigger than a village. It

is at once an intentional community with high spiritual ideals that one can join, and also a secularized society where one can live and work without formally joining the community or subscribing to its ideology. With a significant portion of its population being “white,” Auroville is both Indian and Western in its cultural accoutrements. To try to explain Auroville is, as Butler (2002) reports the situation as described by one Aurovilian,ⁱⁱ “ similar to the proverbial five blind people describing an elephant, when each is holding on to a different part . . . and because Auroville is at the same time growing, evolving, it is a process that continues” (p. 20). This dissertation by no means seeks to describe all of Auroville. It focuses on only one aspect of it, namely that of social psychology, and depicts, through use of qualitative methodology, the joys and challenges experienced by Aurovilians as they seek to manifest the spiritual ideals of Auroville.

Auroville is located eight kilometers north of the city of Pondicherry, in what was considered a “backward” or economically impoverished area of rural Tamil Nadu. Thirteen villages in Auroville’s immediate vicinity, with a total population of approximately 40,000 people, are directly or indirectly affected by the Auroville experiment. Auroville currently comprises about 2000 acres of land that was bought from the feudal landowners of these villages. Auroville was started, however, on just a few hundred acres of arid wasteland. The land was so badly eroded that a District Forest Officer visiting the area in 1976 noted: “The entire area is exposed to wind and water erosion. If this is allowed to continue, then . . . the people will be forced to vacate the land in the not too distant future”

(Auroville Project Coordination Group, 1998, p. 3). To think of creating an international city under such conditions defies all logic, so it is hardly surprising that, even after four decades, no such city, especially the futuristic city of technological marvels that was portrayed in the early brochures of Auroville, exists. But what is perhaps even more surprising is that Aurovilians have, through massive environmental regeneration efforts, transformed the deforested, barren land into lush, green habitable environs, and attracted funds from numerous well-established government and non-government international agencies as well as private donors to slowly plan and build the infrastructure needed for urban development. Last but not least, Aurovilians have finally completed their 37-year project, the Matrimandir, a sacred edifice located at the centre of the planned city. A monumental building, the Matrimandir is an architectural marvel and, despite Aurovilians' wishes to the contrary, viewed as a major tourist attraction of the area.

In terms of urban development, Auroville has created basic infrastructure with accommodation for its residents in over 100 settlements. Municipal services for food, renewable energy and appropriate building technology, ecological agriculture, electricity and water supply, communication, waste management, education, health care, financial transactions and town planning have also been established. Additionally, Auroville has made commendable efforts towards promoting rural development, health care—including alternative therapies—educational research, innovative forms of economic sharing, handicrafts and small-scale industries. Admittedly, this development has been secured because of

the availability of cheap local labor to do most of the manual work in Auroville. About 5,000 people from the surrounding villages and the nearby town of Pondicherry are employed in the farms, forests, business units, and homes of Auroville.

Underlying this multifaceted growth of Auroville is a spiritual aim, for Auroville draws its inspiration from the work of the visionary sage Sri Aurobindo. As the Mother, the founder of Auroville and the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, declared, “Auroville wants to be the first realization of human unity based on the teaching of Sri Aurobindo, where men [sic] of all countries would be at home” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 221). More specifically, Auroville is shaped by certain transpersonal ideals that are explicitly spelled out in certain key texts written by the Mother, such as the “The Charter” (Alfassa, 1980) “The Dream” (Alfassa, 1978), and “To be a True Aurovilian” (Alfassa, 1980)ⁱⁱⁱ as well as in numerous transcribed conversations about her vision of Auroville that have been collected in two voluminous manuscripts (Alfassa, 1978, 1980).

It should be noted here that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother formulated the spiritual discipline of Integral Yoga prior to, and hence independent of the transpersonal psychology of the West; nevertheless, Integral Yoga closely parallels the emerging trend of participatory transpersonal psychology as envisioned by Ferrer (2002). Integral Yoga is a unique spiritual practice that seeks a radical transformation of the world through the evolution of consciousness brought about by the conscious participation of human beings and their engaged action in the world. The transpersonal ideals of Auroville, which are to be seen in

the larger context of Integral Yoga, I argue, have had the power to encourage Aurovilians to endure in this experiment in human unity and to continue, despite all odds, to live here and work at building the “city” of Auroville. In this dissertation, I examine how these ideals have contributed to the social psychology of the community resulting perhaps in an *avant garde* spiritual society, which is at once inspiring and challenging.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore the relationship between the spiritual ideals of Auroville and certain facets of the social psychology of Auroville. The socio-psychological aspects that will be examined in the study are: the dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective, challenges and joys that individuals face, and finally, shadow issues, if any, that emerge from the data collected.

A Biographical Sketch of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

To comprehend the social psychology of Auroville, one must, of necessity, understand the spiritual vision and the unique charisma^{iv} of the two individuals, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, who have inspired the creation of Auroville. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) is regarded as one of India’s greatest philosopher-sages. The Mother (1878-1973), who founded Auroville in 1968, was recognized by Sri Aurobindo himself as his spiritual collaborator (Iyengar, 1994; Van Vrekhem, 2000).

Auroville was started after the demise of Sri Aurobindo, and while no Aurovilians have personally met him, many Westerners were inspired to join

Auroville after reading *Sri Aurobindo or The Adventure of Consciousness*, an account of Sri Aurobindo's life and philosophy by Satprem (1968), a French disciple. The charisma of the Mother was undoubtedly a major factor for the early Aurovilians to commit themselves to the seemingly impossible project of Auroville; however, given the fact that it has been 35 years since the Mother passed away, the immediacy of the charisma of her personality is no longer available to people in the same way as it was for those who actually met her. For instance, one of my interviewees D,^v a long-time Aurovilian, for whom contact with the Mother was the most transformative element in his life, wonders as to what people who never met her actually mean when they claim a connection to her. The charismatic authority of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother lives on through their words and their spiritual vision of human kind. Here, I offer a brief sketch of the life history of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother,^{vi} and in Chapter 2 describe in more detail their evolutionary spiritual vision and the discipline of Integral Yoga.

Sri Aurobindo formulated a spiritual and largely rational vision of evolution, which envisages a complete transformation of the world and the birth of a new, spiritualized race. The scope and uniqueness of Sri Aurobindo's work is mirrored in his unusual life experience. Born as Aurobindo Ghose in Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo^{vii} was sent to study in England at the age of seven and, in accordance with his father's wishes, received an entirely occidental education without any contact with Indian languages or culture. A brilliant scholar in Greek and Latin, Sri Aurobindo was also well versed in French, German, and Italian. After leaving Cambridge, just a year short of his graduation, Sri Aurobindo returned to India in

1892 at age 21 and took it upon himself to learn Sanskrit and several modern Indian languages. In India, especially in the years 1906-1910, Sri Aurobindo was deeply involved in the revolutionary struggle against the British colonial rule and increasingly regarded by both Indians and the British as a powerful figure in the national freedom movement. In 1910, after he had been arrested, imprisoned, and acquitted for sedition, Sri Aurobindo, following powerful spiritual experiences, abruptly withdrew from political life to take up residence in Pondicherry, a small French colony in southern India. He was accompanied by a small group of devotees, which grew over time to develop into a *āṣṛām*, a traditional residential institution in India for people who formally devote their lives to spiritual development.

Sri Aurobindo's vision of life, detailed in over thirty volumes, traces the evolution of the human species through anthropology, sociology, politics, psychology, culture, and religion. Most of his major works, namely *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Secret of the Veda*, *The Ideal of Human Unity* and *The Human Cycle* were written simultaneously in the period 1914-1920 and published in a serialized form in a monthly philosophical review, *The Arya*. In 1972, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram issued a definitive edition, the Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library—Popular Edition, of the collected works of Sri Aurobindo in 30 volumes. The genius of Sri Aurobindo lies in the fact that he successfully reworks esoteric Indian spiritual thought in terms accessible to the modern, rational thinker. Sri Aurobindo thus represents a remarkable synthesis of Indian and Western traditions, and accordingly his

writings appeal to people from both the East and the West. An accomplished poet, whose primary mode of expression was in the English language, Sri Aurobindo is equally respected in India for his poetry as well as for his philosophy.

The Mother was born as Mirra Alfassa in Paris in 1878 to Jewish parents of Turkish and Egyptian origin. An accomplished painter, she was part of the intellectual and cultural life of Paris at the turn of the century. She became increasingly interested in spiritual and occult matters because of certain mystical experiences that she had had since early childhood. This led her in 1905 to study in Algeria with a renowned occult master Max Theon. It was her interest in spirituality that led the Mother to accompany her husband to Pondicherry in 1914 to meet Sri Aurobindo. The Mother was deeply moved by her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo, recognizing him as a spiritual master who had, through her dreams, guided her own development. The outbreak of the First World War, however, forced the Mother and her husband to leave India, and after a brief stay in France, they lived in Japan for four years. In 1920 they returned to Pondicherry, and shortly thereafter they divorced with the Mother choosing to permanently live in India with Sri Aurobindo and his disciples. The relationship between the Mother and Sri Aurobindo was one of mutual collaboration and spiritual inspiration. The Mother also took upon herself to organize the communal household, and she personally supervised or even attended to Sri Aurobindo's needs. Publicly acknowledging the Mother as his spiritual equal, in 1920 Sri Aurobindo referred to her as *the Mother*^{viii} to indicate that she was a human

embodiment of the Universal Mother—the creative, dynamic principle of the universe traditionally recognized in India as a feminine, creative force.

To better look after the growing numbers of disciples that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother attracted, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was formally founded in 1926 and soon grew to be one of the largest *āṣṛāms* of India. That same year, Sri Aurobindo retired into seclusion to concentrate on his spiritual work, while the Mother continued to oversee and manage the multifarious activities of the *āṣṛām*, including starting an international school in 1952. Since its inception, the *āṣṛām* has been renowned in India for the quality of its products, its self-sufficiency, efficient management and hygiene—all testimonies to the Mother’s commitment to and capacity for material organization. The Mother also played a primary role in guiding the spiritual development of the disciples, and her numerous writings, messages, and conversations with the disciples have been published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in a 17-volume set as the *Collected Works of the Mother*. Additionally, transcripts of the Mother’s conversations with her disciple Satprem, in the period from 1951-1973, were posthumously published in 13 volumes as the *Mother’s Agenda*.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother regarded themselves as being of a single consciousness embodied in two different bodies, with differentiated roles to play in the development of Integral Yoga. The Mother once described her role in 1969 thus:

The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo’s vision was entrusted to the Mother. The creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken.... The Ashram founded and built by the Mother was the

first step towards the accomplishment of this goal. The project of Auroville is the next step, more exterior, which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind. (Alfassa, 1980, p. 210)

After Sri Aurobindo passed away in 1950, the Mother is believed to have continued the work of “making available...transformative energies of the highest realms of the Divine available to human beings” (Combs, 1996, p. 60). As per the record of a disciple, the Mother claimed that even after Sri Aurobindo’s physical demise, she was guided in an occult way by “the Sri Aurobindo whom I know . . . for he is still with me, day and night, thinking through my brain, writing through my pen, speaking through my mouth and acting through my organizing power” (Pandit, 1975, p. 251). And on some occasions, in reference to the ideals of Auroville, she particularly credits Sri Aurobindo as being the instigator of the vision of the future city. So while the Mother undoubtedly was the personal guiding force and inspiration for the Aurovilians, for all practical purposes, there is no difference between Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s spiritual work and vision.

Literature Review

Major Academic Studies on Auroville

Over the years, the Auroville experiment has been documented by a fair number of academics, journalists and writers. An informal list compiled by the webmaster of Auroville website, and last updated in June 2007, documents over 120 academic papers, theses and dissertations written about Auroville, but the vast majority of these papers are scientific research papers, documenting Auroville’s experiments in reforestation and renewable energy systems. The

academic work on Auroville in the field of humanities mostly concentrates on the founding philosophy of Auroville, without reference to the practices of the followers. There are only eight theses and dissertations, with five of them being in available in English, on the social and cultural life of Auroville and based on fieldwork.

One of the most significant qualitative studies of Auroville is Pillai's (2005) doctoral dissertation, "Auroville: Philosophy, Performance and Power in an International Utopian Community in South India." Pillai uses a *performance studies approach* to ethnographically examine the processes by which Aurovilians seek to manifest the stated vision of Auroville. While she explores the relationship between Auroville's ideals and its daily life from cultural and anthropological perspectives, my research concerns are to understand the socio-psychological processes of the community of Auroville in the context of its transpersonal ideals, especially as subjectively understood and held by individuals. Pillai additionally examines, from a cultural anthropological perspective, the power of selected written texts in formulating the communal identity of Auroville. While I agree with Pillai's deconstruction of the operation of power in Auroville, I approach the issue of a communal identity from a social psychological perspective: I explore communal identity as it is formed in the ongoing dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective.

Another recent doctoral dissertation by Jouhki (2005) centers on Tamil-European relations between Aurovilians and local villagers using the anthropological discourses of orientalism and occidentalism. While part of my

socio-psychological study focuses on Tamil-European relations, I limit myself to studying these relations as manifested within Auroville: I do not include the neighboring village of Kuyilapalayam as Joukhi does. On this issue of cross-cultural relations, I concur with Joukhi's observation that "on the whole the two discourses seemed to produce a simplified and exaggerated image of the Other" (p. 6). My research differs from Joukhi's study in that firstly, I use anthropological theories of group formation for a socio-psychological understanding of Tamil-European relations, and secondly, I further analyze cross-cultural relations in the light of the spiritual ideals of Auroville.

Leard (1993) is one of the first academics to examine sociological processes in Auroville. His master's thesis details how Aurovilians effectively resist institutionalization and *routinization of charisma*^{ix} by living out a subjectively experienced reality. I draw the same conclusions as Leard that Auroville cannot be equated with a cult or a religious utopia, but, unlike Leard, the primary focus of my dissertation is to understand and describe the socio-psychological processes that happen at an individual and collective level as Aurovilians attempt to embody transpersonal ideals that they subscribe to and thereby live out a subjectively experienced reality. As a student of psychology, I emphasize the psychological aspect of Aurovilians' experiences rather than their sociological ramifications, as Leard does.

Two other master's theses, those of Olsson (2000) and Butler (2002), come closer to my own research interests, in that they seek to describe how Aurovilians construct a particular sense of self. Olsson particularly touches upon

the relationship between the ideals and reality as she ethnographically examines how individuals interpret the Mother's text "The Dream" (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94) in the context of their own lives, but while Olsson starts out with the premise that "The Dream" is the primary text that documents the transpersonal ideals of Auroville, I do not automatically assume that all Aurovilians are inspired by this text. Instead I seek to find out what is it that inspires people to continue to live and participate in this socio-spiritual experiment. For example, one of my important discoveries subverting my own assumptions was that children who grow up in Auroville do not even cognitively approach the ideals. Rather, their responses to my queries suggest that they embody spirituality in a more natural and integral way than adult Aurovilians who joined Auroville because they were inspired by "The Charter," "The Dream," "To be a True Aurovillian" (see Appendices A, B, & C respectively) or other texts.

Butler's (2002) M.A. thesis on the oral history of Auroville, documents how individual Aurovilians construct a self identity based on their individual memory and the communal memory of the historical development of Auroville. Oral history naturally forms part of my research as well, for people recollect past experiences of their life in Auroville and their embodiment of its ideals. As Butler points out, these selected memories shape an individual's self-identity. Unlike Butler's work, however, I also enunciate, on the basis of my research, how Aurovilians come to form a self-identity that is born out of their continued spiritual seeking to embody transpersonal ideals and beliefs and out of their

interactions with the larger community. As I see it, the formation of a self-identity, especially in Auroville with its focus on evolution, is an ongoing process.

Review of Anthropological and Sociological Studies on Intentional Communities

By intentionally choosing values that are different from those of mainstream society and by their attempt to build a city dedicated to human unity Aurovilians can be regarded as an intentional community. Intentional communities have been thoroughly analyzed from various perspectives in the academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Of these studies, Kanter's (1972) work, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*, which uses the theoretical construct of *commitment* to understand internal relationships within an intentional community, is considered to be a landmark study. In Chapter 5, viewing Auroville as an intentional community, I use Kanter's theory of commitment to analyze the social psychology of Auroville.

From his study of rituals, V. Turner (1967, 1969) derived the concepts of *liminality* and *communitas*, and he successfully used them in more secular contexts to describe patterns of social interaction that foster community (1974). Since then, these concepts have gained currency in the field of cultural anthropology. For example, each of the six case studies in S. L. Brown's (2002b) recent anthology on intentional communities utilizes the notions of liminality and *communitas* to explore processes of community building. Reviewing this body of literature, I analyze the beliefs and values of individual Aurovilians that foster or hinder liminality and *communitas*.

Most literature on intentional communities concentrates on processes within communities. I, however, also deem it useful to study intentional communities as a counterpoint to mainstream society. In this context, I review Abrams and McCullough's (1976) commissioned study on the social relevance of communes, *Communes, Sociology and Society*, and analyze how Aurovilians' attitudes to work sufficiently differ from those of mainstream society. In specifically analyzing the social psychology of Auroville, I review the theories of *social representations* (Moscovici, 2000), *symbolic interactionism* (Blumer, 1969) and *social identity theory* (Tajfel & J. C. Turner, 1986). I particularly find social identity theory useful in clarifying certain aspects of psychological and sociological aspects of group behavior in Auroville. A more detailed literature review on intentional communities is included in Chapter 4 titled Auroville: An Utopian Dream?

Review of Literature on Spiritual Societies and Social Evolution

Honoring Auroville's intention to be a city with spiritual mission, I review recent literature on the emergence of spirituality in societies—both theoretical and qualitative studies—by Bauwens (2007) Forman (2004), Griffin (1988), M. King (2004), Wexler (2000), and Wilber (1984, 1995) and analyze to the extent Auroville embodies what can be termed as *postsecular spirituality*. Also, by analyzing evolutionary processes—particularly in the social context—as documented by Bellah (1970), Jantsch (1980), Laszlo (1987), Russell (1995), Teilhard de Chardin (1955/1999), Ghose (1971), and Wilber (1995), I demonstrate how the spiritual ideals of Auroville and their embodiment by the

community facilitate its evolution into a more spiritual society. In this respect, by applying theoretical concepts, namely Markley's "guiding images" (1976, p. 214) and Bauwens' "object of sociality" (2007, p. 41) to the lived social experiment of Auroville, I believe I make a unique contribution to theories on social evolution. A more detailed literature review on social evolution is included in Chapter 6, The Emergence of a Spiritual Society.

Key Concepts

Integral Yoga

Integral Yoga is a unique spiritual path that seeks to bring about a radical spiritual transformation of the world through the power of a Divine, evolutionary force, termed by Sri Aurobindo as the Supramental force. The path enjoins its practitioners to participate in the process of this largely pre-ordained Divine evolution. It is a pluralistic tradition in that it recognizes that the Divine can be accessed by individuals in innumerable ways and that each individual has his/her unique path to the Divine. The collective aspect of Integral Yoga stems from the fact that the individual's inner growth helps in the general progress of humankind. Integral Yoga envisions not just a one-pointed spiritual realization, brought about, as was common with many Indian spiritual traditions, by a renunciation of the world and society, but an integral spiritual realization brought about by an active engagement with the world and society. For Sri Aurobindo, all of life—all our social, political, economic and other human concerns—consciously or unconsciously strives towards this Divine goal. The collective and the individual are mutually connected as the society gives the individual a greater opportunity to

express and fulfill her/himself, and simultaneously the individual's inner growth has a positive effect on the society.

Transpersonal Psychology and Participatory Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology, regarded as the Fourth Force in Psychology, is an ongoing movement since the 1960s that offers a wider perspective to Western psychology by recognizing that the personal self is always embedded in a larger spiritual context. Traditionally, transpersonal psychology includes all phenomena that is recognized as being “beyond the personal” such as mystical experiences, altered states of consciousness, psi phenomena and so forth (Sutich, 1969, 1976; Vich, 1988, 1990; Walsh, 1993), but of late, there has been an increasing movement within transpersonal psychology to honor the sacred in daily life (Cortright, 1997; Ferrer, 2002). All transpersonal paradigms, despite their differences, uphold spirituality as being central to their vision (Sutich, 1969; Ferrer, 2002). While Ferrer (2002) cautions against a one-to-one equivalence between spirituality and transpersonality, for the purposes of this study, the terms *spiritual* and *transpersonal* are used interchangeably.

In recent years, Ferrer (2002) has given a new direction to transpersonal psychology by uprooting it from its historic mooring in the non-dualistic spirituality of perennial philosophy and redefining transpersonal phenomena as “multilocal participatory events” that are capable of engaging intersubjective and even objective aspects of life. Participatory transpersonal psychology, a paradigmatic shift within transpersonal psychology, recognizes the participation

of other factors outside of the individual in the enactment of transpersonal psychological experiences.

Transpersonal Vision and Transpersonally-Oriented Community

The term *transpersonal vision* refers to the vision of a spiritual society that the Mother envisioned for Auroville. This transpersonal vision is derived from ideals set forth by the Mother for the community of Auroville that are explicitly spelled out in numerous transcribed conversations and certain key texts written by her, such as Auroville's Charter, "The Dream," and "To be a True Aurovilian" (see appendices A, B, and C). These ideals range from normative and specific instructions to prescriptive hopes and wishes. Auroville is defined as a transpersonally-oriented community because it has this transpersonal vision of the Mother as its foundational basis.

Spiritual Ideals

Spiritual ideals refer both to Auroville's ideals as given by the Mother as well as the personal ideals, values and beliefs that inspire Aurovilians to participate in and manifest the Mother's transpersonal vision for Auroville. Given Sri Aurobindo's dictum, that "all life is yoga" (Ghose, 1990, p. 7), all ideals held by Aurovilians can be regarded as spiritual. For the purposes of this study, however, spiritual ideals refer not to materialistic goals but primarily to transpersonal and inspirational values, beliefs and wishes that Aurovilians subscribe to. Spiritual ideals, held by Aurovilians, will be empirically determined by the researcher on the basis of her interpretive research methodology.

Social Psychology

Generally speaking, social psychology studies how social conditions affect human beings. As an academic discipline, social psychology explores social behavior in all its forms including how individuals interact with others in a group. For the purposes of this study, the term social psychology is used to describe some socio-psychological processes in Auroville. While theoretically a number of variable factors can be used to determine the social psychology of Auroville, this study restricts itself to only three aspects:

Firstly, the study proposes to depict the interaction of the individual and the society in the context of the dialectic that exists between the transpersonal vision of Auroville given by the Mother and the pluralistic interpretations of these ideals as they are embodied by Aurovilians. The dialectic of the individual and the society, derived from Sri Aurobindo's idea of a supramental society that allows for infinite individual differentiation contained within a spiritual realization of the oneness of all, is also expressed in terms of the intentionally created society of Auroville and the diversity of individuals (in terms of culture, race, age, gender and values) who constitute it.

Secondly, the study depicts joys and challenges that individuals face in their intersubjective relationship to the larger community of Auroville. The study particularly seeks to interpret these intersubjective joys and challenges from the perspective of spiritual ideals individually held by Aurovilians.

Lastly, by analyzing data on the challenges that people face in Auroville, this study points out some of the shadow issues prevalent in the social psychology of the community.

Shadow and Cultural Complex

The term *shadow* is derived from Jungian depth psychology, which holds that every society or culture creates a shadow comprising values and desires that have been ignored, unacknowledged, consciously and/or unconsciously repressed. At the collective level, the cultural values of a society and its professed humanity, casts its own antithetical shadow. In Jungian psychology, persistent challenges, deep-rooted frustrations and projections often indicate the presence of shadow issues (Jung, 1969; Singer & Kimbles, 2004). In this study I analyze only the data on the challenges that people face in Auroville for the presence of shadow issues in the community.

A *cultural complex* is defined here, in the light of Singer and Kimbles' work (2004), as a group complex that is expressed as a collective emotion by a social group (that is, a group bonded by social categories of race, gender and so forth) in charged interactions with other social groups. It is a collective shadow as it arises out of a shared cultural unconscious. Research into the nature and activation of cultural complexes is still in its preliminary stages, and in my work here, I apply this concept of cultural complex only in the context of describing intergroup behavior between two dominant social groups in Auroville.

Commitment

In the context of studies on intentional communities, *commitment* is defined as the “the willingness of people to do what will help maintain the group because it provides what they need” (Kanter, 1972, p. 66). While I use Kanter’s definition to study Auroville’s social psychology, I also point to ways in which the definition is inadequate to explain all the group-bonding processes in Auroville.

Liminality

In cultural anthropology, liminality is defined as a transitional stage characterized by openness and indeterminacy due to a loss in one’s former sense of identity (V. Turner, 1967, 1969, 1974). Here the term is more generally used to denote all social processes and socio-psychological behavior in Auroville that is marked by vulnerability and openness.

Communitas

In cultural anthropology, *communitas* is an intense feeling of togetherness, of social equality and solidarity among relative strangers (V. Turner, 1967, 1969, 1974), and the term is used as such in my study here.

Postsecular Spirituality

The term *postsecular spirituality* is used to describe contemporary spirituality (M. King, 2004), where the adjective “postsecular” distinguishes contemporary spiritual expression from religious expression of the pre-modern era. I view Griffin’s (1988) ideas of a *constructive postmodern society* and

Wexler's (2000) description of the current *mystical society* as alluding to the same phenomenon.

Social Identity Theory (Personal Identity and Social Identity)

Social identity theory, popularized by J. C. Turner (1982), seeks to describe the processes by which individuals identify themselves as a social group that adopts shared attitudes and behavior-patterns to outsiders. I apply J. C. Turner's theory of social identity to explore certain group interactions within Auroville. Social identity theory encompasses related psychological notions of *personal identity* and *social identity*.

Following J. C. Turner (1982), I use the term personal identity to refer to specific defining characteristics of self-identity, such as feelings of competence, of adaptation, happiness and so on, which are more personal by nature as opposed to social categories of race, class, gender, age, and wealth. Given my research interest, however, I restrict myself to only those aspects of personal identity that are somehow triggered by the individual's participation in Auroville.

Social identity in this study uses Tajfel's (1982) definition, "as that *part* (emphasis in original) of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 2).

Significance of the Study

Personal Significance

If, as Habermas (1971) holds, human interest guides the production of knowledge, then I feel it is incumbent on all of us in academia to deeply question

the interests or motives we have in our pursuit and production of knowledge. For most of my adult life, as a practitioner of Integral Yoga, I have believed that the only knowledge worth gaining is knowledge that is embodied, is integrated benefiting the mind, heart, and body and has a transformative action on the world and self. I cherish these beliefs more deeply than ever being increasingly aghast at the unfolding environmental catastrophe (that of global warming, ozone layer depletion and species extinction) caused by the mainstream “technical cognitive interest” of humankind. I have also become increasingly aware of the oneness of all living things, precisely because this environmental catastrophe will affect all of us. In this context, the only knowledge that I find worth pursuing is knowledge that benefits all of humanity and the Earth community.^x While I have been inspired by the unfolding of the Auroville experiment in the past forty years, I believe that the social and spiritual significance of this experiment far exceeds the lives, desires and ambitions of the people who presently live there, and hence my current interest in analyzing Auroville as a unique social experiment for the benefit of a larger audience. The personal significance that this work has for me is directly related to the social significance it holds for others, both inside and outside of Auroville.

Social Significance

If it is true, as I examine in Chapter 6 of my dissertation, that there is an emergence of spirituality in contemporary society and that society itself is moving, as Russell says, from an information age to a “consciousness age” (1995, p. 256), then there is an imperative need to study and identify these social

processes so as to facilitate their unfolding. The social significance of my qualitative case study on Auroville accrues from the fact that by researching and describing the lived experience of Aurovilians, I identify ways by which our spiritual seeking, individually and collectively, can be of service to all of humankind. I see my work as a transformative praxis that encourages others to more deeply analyze and embody their own spiritual pursuits, and by doing so to bring about a much-needed social change in the world. I also hope my study, by casting a certain objective light on social processes and socio-psychological dynamics in Auroville, makes Aurovilians conscious of their own practices and thereby facilitates the growth of the community toward its ideals.

Academic Significance

Qualitatively researching and describing the social psychology of Auroville necessitated a multidisciplinary approach that engages with the academic disciplines of religious studies, anthropology, sociology, social psychology and spiritual or transpersonal psychology. Consequently my work has a multivalent academic significance. It is also my opinion that we need to adopt more integrated approaches to knowledge where qualitative research tests theoretical concepts and thus informs theoretical knowledge. By applying my qualitative research findings to prevalent theories in the above disciplines, I believe I do precisely that in my work.

Most etic sociological studies of religious movements, particularly new religious movements in USA, are pejorative in their analyses. Merely by viewing all current social expressions of spirituality as new religious movements and

frequently equating them with cults, sociology has done a disservice both to academia and to the lay public (Saliba, 2003). By seeking to distinguish between religion and spirituality and by seeking to psychologically differentiate between the faculties of faith and reason, I caution sociologists and anthropologists from making simplistic generalizations about spiritual communities and religious utopias. By describing socio-psychological processes of Auroville from an emic perspective and by honoring both first-person and third-person viewpoints, I show by example that one can bring more nuanced perspectives, both sympathetic and critical, to bear on qualitative studies of spiritual/religious communities.

Anthropological studies on intentional communities tend to focus on the group as a whole. I believe I make a noteworthy contribution to this field by focusing on individual members of the community. By applying prevalent theoretical concepts in sociology and cultural anthropology identified by Kanter (1972) and V. Turner (1969, 1974), namely, commitment, liminality and *communitas*, to the data garnered in my qualitative study, and particularly by showing the inadequacy of some of these concepts in understanding the social psychology of Auroville, my work informs prevalent theory. Along the lines of Abrams and McCullough's (1976) work, I also make a valuable contribution to sociology by examining how Aurovilians' attitudes towards economy and governance subverts mainstream understanding of these sociological processes.

The field of social psychology, with its focus on mainstream society, neglects analyses of intentional communities. Also, this academic discipline has a reductionistic perspective of human nature by viewing the individual as being

socially conditioned and communities as being socially constructed by macroeconomic forces. By examining how the spiritual ideals of Auroville catalyze subjective human intents into action both at an individual and at a collective level, I hope to pique interest among social psychologists by my pioneering case study of the social psychology of Auroville.

In the past decade there has been a growing body of literature that theorizes about or records the emergence of spirituality in contemporary society. This emergence of spirituality in society, however, has not attracted the attention of mainstream sociologists (Wexler, 2000). Similarly though systems scientists and thinkers have, since the 1980s, examined the process of social evolution, they too have failed to fully register the explosion of interest in spirituality in everyday society. I believe that by not only engaging with contemporary literature on the emergence of spirituality in our times, but also analyzing this phenomenon from a scientific, evolutionary perspective, I make a significant contribution to theories of social evolution. The value of my work is further underscored by the fact that it is based on qualitative research data on Auroville.

Lastly, while the fourth force in psychology, that of transpersonal psychology, was born in the 1960s out of the widespread interest in spirituality and transpersonal phenomena triggered by the use of psychedelics, meditation and other consciousness-expanding exercises, the movement itself focused on the individual self and not on the self in relation to others. Ferrer's (2002) work revisioned transpersonal theory by recognizing the prevalent rich plurality of religious and spiritual expressions and the participatory and relational nature of

transpersonal experiences; Ferrer's legacy needs to be honored and transpersonal psychology needs to be further revised to incorporate social psychology. Instead of the narcissistic focus on the individual that has dogged the birth and development of transpersonal psychology, the interconnected nature of our world and the participatory nature of human experience calls for studies on social transpersonal psychology—studies that take into account the emergence of transpersonal or spiritual phenomena in society itself and studies that view the individual self as a transpersonal being embedded in a network of social relationships. While exploring all the theoretical ramifications of this suggestion is beyond the scope of my dissertation, I see my work on the social psychology of the transpersonal community to Auroville as a preliminary step in this direction.

CHAPTER 2: PHILOSOPHICAL, PHYSICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Philosophical Foundations: The Evolutionary Philosophy of Integral Yoga

As a spiritual concept, evolution predates the scientific findings of Darwin. In India, there are cryptic Vedic references that Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1970) interprets as affirming his own mystic insights into the evolutionary process as well as the story of the ten incarnations of *Vishnū* in the *Bhagavat Purāṇa* that are seen by many as an allegorical reference to scientific evolution (Van Vrekhem, 2000). In Western civilization, German mystics and philosophers, such as Jakob Bohme (1575-1624), Leibniz (1646-1716), the 19th century German Idealists—Fichte, Schelling, Hegel—are generally credited with developing evolutionary theories based on their intuitions about physical reality being a progressive revelation of God.

However, it is only with the publication of *The Origin of Species* (Darwin, 1936) that the concept of evolution steadily gained force. Evolution is now commonly accepted as a fact among scientists, philosophers, religious leaders and lay people alike, barring, of course, creationists who are particularly prevalent in USA and subscribe to the Biblical notion of a transcendental God as creator of the universe (Laszlo, 1987). The discovery of the evolutionary process poses a serious theological challenge to most, if not all, religions in that they have to cope with the scientific fact that all of life—including the human species—was not deliberately created by God as described by many religious cosmologies; rather it spontaneously emerged from pre-existing conditions and is self-impelled to grow

and manifest increasing complexity.^{xi} Evolution as a scientific concept is now applied not just to biological processes, but also to cosmology (to comprehend the dynamics of the universe) and to social sciences (to understand the growth of human societies). As a philosophical tenet, the concept of evolution appeals to many contemporary thinkers perhaps precisely because it is rooted within a rational scientific paradigm.

From a scientific perspective, Dynamics Systems Theory, a branch of Systems Theory,^{xii} offers a broad understanding of the evolutionary process by identifying the properties of an evolutionary system. Dynamics Systems Theory, based on the work of Prigogine in the 1970s in thermodynamics, holds that a *dynamic open system*,^{xiii} which is close to disequilibrium, at some point spontaneously self-organizes itself into a more complex and integrated structure. The new structure that emerges is ontologically different than the sum of its constituent parts and has greater autonomy and greater potential to meet the challenges posed by its environment. Systems scientists and thinkers, namely Jantsch (1980), Laszlo (1987) and Russell (1995) see the emergence of matter, living organisms, human beings and societies as the unfolding of a single evolutionary process. Systems scientists have identified the following basic properties of a system that is capable of evolutionary development: (a) The system is open to dynamic exchanges with the environment, (b) the system is complex—it is of a certain critical size and comprises a number of differentiated but interrelated parts that as a unified whole exhibit radically different properties, (c) the system is prone to random fluctuations that arise from complexities

inherent in its own structure or from its exchanges with its environment, (d) the system is capable of self-organization;^{xiv} and (e) the system allows for the emergence of new properties or entirely novel structures. Apart from identifying these general characteristics, however, scientists, especially given the significant gaps in data, are at a loss to explain the process itself or to predict its final outcome (Russell, 1995; Sahtouris, 1998). Indeed most scientists involved in the study of complex evolving systems admit that “causally determined processes with *completely* [emphasis in original] predictable outcomes seldom occur in nature” and “it is also impossible to predict the exact outcome of most natural processes” (Haight, 2003, pp. 182-183).

Scientifically speaking, the unpredictability in nature stems firstly from the fact that open dissipative systems are highly sensitive to initial conditions. Even slight differences in the initial conditions are hugely amplified as the system evolves over time. It is thus not feasible to predict the outcome of the system as determining all the initial conditions of a system is practically impossible. Secondly, by tracking the processes of complex evolving systems over time, scientists have discovered that such systems are guided in mysterious ways by patterns termed as *attractors*. These attractors are largely responsible of the emergence of new, structured systems by bestowing order on the chaotic processes of initial dissipative systems. The presence of attractors is only detected over time by studying its effect on evolving systems. Scientists are at a loss to determine a priori the presence of attractors for they can take complex shapes, which, mathematically speaking, are spread over three or more dimensions

(Combs, 1996; Haught, 2003). Underscoring the unpredictable nature of the evolving universe, Haught states, “chaos and complexity imply that nature is better understood as an indeterminate striving toward future self-realization than as an inevitable set of results arising out of a dead past” (p. 189). While evolutionary biologists widely disagree about the exact mechanism of evolution, some, notably Kauffman (1993), have come to recognize that the inherent self-ordering of living systems plays an equal if not a greater role in the evolution of species than *natural selection* as identified by Darwin.

There is no consensus among philosophers either about the purpose, telos or the processes of evolution. Consequently, while there are a number of evolutionary theories prevalent today—Neo Darwinism, Process Philosophy, Conscious Evolutionism, Integralism and so forth—they differ from one another in certain specific details, such as in the importance that they give to the individual, the community, or to the action of an evolutionary force in influencing the evolutionary process.

Sri Aurobindo, classified as an integral philosopher among evolutionary theorists, generally accepts the scientific “logic of the evolutionary process” (Ghose, 1972a, p. 794), but he claims that spiritual evolution follows the “logic of the Infinite” (p. 329) and has its own laws of working that cannot always be explained within the scientific paradigm.^{xv} He specifically calls us to develop and rely on our spiritual intuition to understand the Divine mystery of the unfolding cosmic drama of evolution. It is not central to and beyond the scope of this dissertation to address these metaphysical issues or to discuss Sri Aurobindo’s

theological concepts in the light of current scientific theories of evolution. Sri Aurobindo's teachings, especially those that deal with the nature of transpersonal reality, are presented here as a mystic's *truth-claims*. They can be accepted on faith or considered as assumptions. While Sri Aurobindo's views on evolution are not subject to empirical proof, they have a certain logical coherence, and I draw parallels between his thought and those of other evolutionary, scientifically-oriented thinkers, namely Jantsch (1980), Russell (1995), Sahtouris (1998) and Teilhard de Chardin (1955/1999). While, on the one hand, the views of these thinkers have not gained much currency in mainstream science, on the other hand, there is no consensus either among mainstream scientists about the origin and development of life. Finally, I would like to point out that of all evolutionary thinkers and social scientists, it is Sri Aurobindo who has the deepest insight into the workings of the human psyche, and he reformulates the ancient Hindu belief of rebirth as a process of spiritual evolution in the individual.

Sri Aurobindo's teaching starts with the ancient Vedantic premise of Brahman, or the One Self, as the ultimate creator—omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent—who is all that is created and is yet beyond creation. This One Self expresses itself in creation through myriad forms and, through the process of evolution, these myriad forms seek to recover their essential unity in the One Self. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "All evolution is the progressive self-revelation of the One to himself" (Ghose, 1998a, p. 219). Just as much for the Christian scientist and mystic, Teilhard de Chardin (1955/1999), God is the Omega point towards which the universe evolves, for Sri Aurobindo then, the telos of evolution is to

reveal the attributes of the One Self, potentially present in the transcendental realm, in the material conditions of our terrestrial existence.

Essentially the One Self, or Brahman, is described in the Vedanta as *Sachchidananda*, having the triune attributes of Sat (absolute existence), Chit-Tapas (absolute consciousness and force), and Ananda (absolute bliss). A number of philosophers, both from the East and the West, recognize that all of creation essentially consists of an exterior form, which is animated by an inner force or consciousness. Indian philosophy holds that it is the attribute of Sat, which determines the exterior form, while that of Chit-Tapas determines the force or consciousness contained within the form. Everything in this creation exhibits these two essential attributes of Sat and Chit-Tapas as form and consciousness-force. According to ancient Indian scriptures, and re-affirmed by Sri Aurobindo, creation is seen as a Divine *līlā* or play, the *raison d'être* of which is Ananda, or Bliss: “From Ananda, says the Upanishad, all existences are born, by Ananda they remain in being and increase, to Ananda they depart” (Ghose, 1972a, p. 100).

Sri Aurobindo posits that in order for evolution to take place there must have been an involution of the Self in matter: “Evolution of Life in matter supposes a previous involution of it there, unless we suppose it to be a new creation magically and unaccountably introduced into Nature” (Ghose, 1972a, p. 185).^{xvi} Elsewhere he describes this process of involution and evolution thus:

This One Being and Consciousness [Sachchidananda] is involved here in Matter. Evolution is the method by which it liberates itself; consciousness appears in what seems to be inconscient, and once having appeared is self-impelled to grow higher and higher and at the same time to enlarge and develop towards a greater and greater perfection. Life is the first step of this release of consciousness; mind is the second; but the evolution does

not finish with mind, it awaits a release into something greater, a consciousness which is spiritual and supramental. The next step of the evolution must be towards the development of Supermind and Spirit as the dominant power in the conscious being. For only then will the involved Divinity in things release itself entirely and it become possible for life to manifest perfection. (Ghose, 1972b, p. 95)

In short, Matter, Life (also referred to as the Vital by Sri Aurobindo Ghose, 1972a) and Mind have emerged from the evolutionary process and form the basis of our present earthly existence. Sri Aurobindo further postulates that as mind is limited in its power and knowledge, there is a fourth principle, the principle of Supermind, endowed with Divine attributes of infinite power and absolute knowledge, which, through the process of evolution, will one day be fully manifested on Earth.

In *The Life Divine* (Ghose, 1972a), which is an exposition of his metaphysical vision of evolution, Sri Aurobindo explains at length that if Brahman, the One Self, is involved in matter, then its attributes of Sat (Existence), Chit (Conscious Force) and Ananda (Bliss) are involved or hidden in matter. In the self-organizing evolutionary process, each higher level of evolution progressively reveals the nature of Brahman; that is to say, each evolutionary level—from matter to plants to animals to human beings and ultimately to supramental being—expresses more and more the qualities of Sat and Chit and Ananda. As one proceeds upwards on the evolutionary scale from matter to life to mind, one observes that at every significant evolutionary stage, new forms with an increasingly complex expression of consciousness are produced. Delineating a similar process that he termed as the “cosmic law of complexity-consciousness” (1955/1999, p. 216), Teilhard de Chardin explains that the universe is self-

organized in such a way that over time one sees the emergence of forms that are increasingly complex in their ontology and expression of consciousness. In other words, for Sri Aurobindo, in inanimate matter, consciousness is limited to subatomic forces; in plants, consciousness shows the capability of response, in animals, instinctive reaction is the expression of consciousness and consciousness manifests as self-reflexive awareness in human beings.

Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1972a) explains that the Divine principle of Ananda, or Bliss, manifests itself as a secret desire towards recovering the essential unity of Sachchidananda. Thus, on the evolutionary scale, Ananda expresses itself as the force of attraction in matter, hunger in the physical-vital domain, desire in the vital, and love in the mental domain of human beings. As “evolution is not finished . . . nor the reasoning animal the supreme figure of Nature” (Ghose, 1998a, p. 443), it follows out of logical necessity that at the supramental level—a stage of consciousness much higher than the mind—a new form or the supramental species will be manifested on Earth. Says Sri Aurobindo, “as man [sic] emerged out of the animal, so out of man the superman emerges” (Ghose, 1998a, p. 443). Sri Aurobindo describes this superman or the supramental race as possessing all the Divine qualities of Sachchidananda, namely, immortality, absolute consciousness, omnipotence and unity.

The Influence of Typal Planes

Hegel (1807/1977) believed that the Spirit (or Self) seeks to become infinite by its struggle to overcome the finite. Sri Aurobindo, however, attests that the Self, or Sachchidananda, never loses its infinity or omnipotence. This

hypothesis leads to some important ramifications. To begin with, the Self, being infinite and omnipotent, does not have any limitations other than those it chooses to impose upon itself. It is free to express itself not just through the process of evolution but in various other ways. On this premise, Sri Aurobindo posits that during the process of involution seven subtle, typal worlds were created that expressed an essential quality of the Self, or Sachchidananda:

All that manifested from the Eternal has already been arranged in worlds or planes of its own nature, planes of subtle Matter, planes of Life, planes of Mind, planes of Supermind, planes of the triune luminous Infinite [that is, the three planes of Sat, Chit and Ananda, which together comprise Sachchidananda]. But these worlds or planes are not evolutionary but typal.

A typal world is one in which some ruling principle manifests itself in its free and full capacity. (Ghose, 1998a, p. 236)

Admittedly, to the modern evolutionary theorist, belief in such intangible and occult worlds would be inadmissible given the lack of objective proof. But Sri Aurobindo, citing his own spiritual experience as evidence and dismissing the limitations of sensorial-experience, states:

Not having bound ourselves down, like so much of modern thought, to the dogma that . . . the analysis of physical experience by the reason alone [is] verifiable . . . and anything beyond this an error, self-delusion and hallucination, we are free to accept this evidence and to admit the reality of these planes. (Ghose, 1972a, p. 787)

It could be mentioned that Sri Aurobindo's description of the typal planes is in consonance with that of the ancient Vedantic seers who spoke of the existence of seven occult planes beyond the material world.

For Sri Aurobindo, the existence of typal planes is fundamental to understanding the complex process of evolution: "The development of Life, Mind and Spirit in the physical being presupposes their existence [that of typal planes];

for these powers are developed here by two co-operating forces, an upward-tending force from below, an upward-drawing and downward-pressing force from above” (Ghose, 1972a, p. 790). He explains that without the influence of typical planes from above, the Spirit could have remained forever imprisoned in Matter, for there is no justification as to why Matter on its own accord should evolve to liberate the Spirit involved within it.

The scientific discovery of attractors in chaos and complexity theories, as discussed in an earlier section, is a useful way of understanding the “upward-drawing” or teleological pull of the typical planes on the material world. Just as attractors guide and eventually determine the emergence of order in a chaotic system, Sri Aurobindo says, “there is the pressure of the superior principles in the higher [typical] planes which . . . may very largely determine the special ways in which it [material evolution] is eventually realized” (Ghose, 1972a, p. 790). Sri Aurobindo, however, explicitly mentions that typical planes not only exert a teleological pull, but also participate in the evolutionary process with a descending force. Conception is a useful analogy to understand these ascending and descending forces of the evolutionary process. Conception takes place only when the womb is ready for impregnation. At each level of evolution, when the Earth (the material womb) was ready to take an evolutionary leap upwards, there was a descent of the corresponding typical plane onto Earth. That is to say, the principle of Mind descended onto Earth from the Mental Plane long before human beings possessing the instrument of mind were born. Similarly, the spiritual

consciousness of the Supermind, according to Sri Aurobindo is believed to now be active on Earth, having descended from the supramental plane from above:

A secret continuous action of the higher powers and principles from their own planes upon terrestrial being and nature . . . must have an effect and a significance. Its first effect has been the liberation of Life and Mind out of Matter; its last effect has been to assist the emergence of a spiritual consciousness. (Ghose, 1972a, p. 790)

According to the Mother, the supramental manifestation upon earth took place in 1956, and in 300 years or more, depending upon the capacity of human beings for progress, the Earth will witness the birth of a new species—the supramental race. While the prediction of a new species, superior to the human species, in the expression of its consciousness, may sound far-fetched to many, Haught (2003) reminds us that “from turbulence in the atmosphere to the evolution of a new species, science is clearly powerless to tell us precisely what is going to occur—even in the near future” (p. 183). Considering that it took at least 200,000 years from the emergence of the homo sapiens to the full flowering of powers of the mind as evidenced today, 300 years is a mere blink of the eye on the evolutionary timescale. It could be noted here that speciation or the emergence of a new species has always been marked by “discontinuity in continuity. . . . a ‘transexperimental interval’ about which we can say nothing scientifically, but beyond which we find ourselves transported to an entirely new biological level” (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955/1999, p. 114). As Laszlo (1987) explains: “Gaps in the fossil record . . . signal periods of perhaps millions of years during which the species did not evolve significantly. New species tend to burst on the scene within much shorter time frames” (p. 77). Some social scientists, among them Markley

(1976), point out that certain socio-cultural changes, especially those in response to crises, are “nonincremental (emphasis in original) in character” (p. 214). Also subscribing to the theory of evolutionary leaps, Russell (1995) additionally points out that the current accelerated pace of scientific technology, particularly in biology and physics, could have an effect in speeding up the evolutionary process. And the neo-Darwinian theory of punctuated equilibria holds that a species remains basically unchanged till a change in the environment causes it to bifurcate into an entirely new species, more complex in its organization and better suited to the environment (Eldredge & Gould, 1972). Certain contemporary scientific thought then is evocative of Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s vision by suggest that the human being can participate in the evolutionary process; that the birth of a new species can happen in a relatively short period of time; and that the new supramental species would co-exist with the human species.

For Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the advent of a supramental age was a certitude. As the Mother, in a decisive message in 1956, said: “The manifestation of the supramental upon earth is . . . a living fact . . . It is at work here, and one day will come when the most blind, the most unconscious, even the most unwilling shall be obliged to recognize it” (Alfassa, 1977a, p. 145). It is to be noted, however, that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother discouraged unnecessary speculation among their disciples about the effects that the supramental consciousness would have on the world, stating that the action of this omnipotent Divine power cannot be entirely predicted but it would work things out in its own way and at its own pace. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother dismiss deterministic

ideas of evolution believing in the infinitely varied working of the supramental force. Their beliefs here are in consonance with complexity theory. For instance, Haught explaining the effect of attractors in a complex evolving system writes:

The specific pattern toward which a system is attracted quietly “influences” it out of some misty region of futurity, enticing it away from the sheer determination by the past and inviting it to experiment with a wide range of possibilities before it settles into a specific morphological pathway. (2003, p. 189)

The Principle of Descent

The idea of a descent of a Divine power from higher planes is not widely accepted in Western theology or spiritual metaphysics, although there are references to it in the writings of certain Greek philosophers, namely, Heraclitus, Plato and Plotinus. Modern thinkers, such as Arthur Lovejoy and Ken Wilber, have more recently developed this topic, but the concept of a “Divine Descent” is elaborated to its fullness in the Hindu tradition. Sri Aurobindo’s description of the various kinds of “descent” of the omnipotent Self includes and goes beyond Wilber’s (1995) concept of descent or *agápē* (the higher reaching down and embracing the lower). In the Indian tradition one important form of descent is the *avatār*, which “is a direct incarnation of the Divine in his manifestation to make the next higher step in evolution possible; for the topmost established level of evolution, though driven to develop by the inherent evolutionary impulse, is unable to pierce the existing ceiling of progress” (Van Vrekhem, 2001, p. 17). While neither Sri Aurobindo nor the Mother referred to themselves as *avatār*, they regarded themselves as evolutionary pathfinders who played a crucial role in bringing down the principle of the Supermind or the supramental consciousness

onto Earth. At first glance, the idea that an individual can decisively help in the evolutionary process of the human species seems unwarranted. But the psychologist Allan Combs, accepting the possibility that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother could well have broken new “evolutionary ground for the entire human species,” points out:

Two Western scientific theorists, Rupert Sheldrake, a molecular chemist and a historian of science, and . . . Ervin Laszlo, a systems philosopher and the architect of the grand evolutionary synthesis have advanced carefully considered hypotheses which support the idea that a few persons, or even a single individual, could conceivably alter the entire future of the human potential. These hypotheses are of . . . enormous potential importance to the whole topic of evolution, especially where it touches the whole issue of consciousness. (1996, p. 49-50)

Integral Psychology

According to Sri Aurobindo, while the evolutionary progress from the mind to the Supermind is an inevitable natural process and does not depend on the human will, human beings can consciously choose to participate in the process and hasten the birth of the new species. “The former steps in evolution,” Sri Aurobindo explains, “were taken by Nature without a conscious will in the plant and animal life, in man Nature becomes able to evolve by a conscious will in the instrument” (Ghose, 1972b, p. 95). It is not so easy, however, for individuals to exercise their conscious will, as human beings are a complex amalgam of different desires arising from different parts of their being.

The fact that man is made up of various interrelated parts of being is accepted by almost all spiritual traditions of the world. Perennial philosophers refer to it as the “Great Nest of Being” and point out that the human being comprises “various levels of existence . . . ranging from matter to body to mind to

soul to spirit” (Wilber, 2000a, p. 5). Sri Aurobindo explains that in the course of evolution from—matter to life to mind—the human being has acquired a physical body, a vital (emotional) body and a mental body. But, in Sri Aurobindo’s classification, these three planes—the physical, the vital and the mental—merely represent the tip of the iceberg of an individual’s consciousness. These three planes form the outer nature or the ego personality of the individual, which governs his waking consciousness. Sri Aurobindo further classifies in detail almost a dozen planes of being that are supraconscious, subconscious and subliminal to this outer nature. In Sri Aurobindo’s vision, the microcosmos of the individual nature corresponds to and connects with the macrocosmos of the typical worlds of the universe. Moreover, Sri Aurobindo holds that, both in the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, each plane of being is governed by its own laws and its own unique consciousness. For instance, in the microcosmos, the physical body has a body-consciousness that is prone to inertia and mechanical or habitual responses to stimuli. The part of the mind that Sri Aurobindo terms the physical mind is associated with the body-consciousness. Similarly, ruling the emotional body of the human being is a vital consciousness and a vital mind that is driven by desires, reactions and impulses. Mind proper, or the mental consciousness, has the capability of self-reflection and rationalization. The human being is usually not able to differentiate between these three different minds arising from different planes for, as Sri Aurobindo says, “in our waking experience, they are all confused together” (Ghose, 1970, p. 347). Since the different planes of being, both in the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, tend to

exert their laws or ways of working on the individual, it becomes extremely difficult for the individual to escape from these influences and consciously participate in the evolutionary process.

The supraconscious realm (the realm above the rational consciousness of the mind), according to Sri Aurobindo, consists of five hierarchical levels of consciousness that connect the ordinary mind of the individual to the universal Supermind. At each higher level of consciousness the individual experiences manifest reality differently and in an increasingly more integral manner.

A central tenet of Sri Aurobindo's description of human psychology is the concept of an individualized soul or psychic being. This psychic being, an unalloyed part of the Divine, is the innermost centre in the human being, hidden from the surface consciousness by all the other planes of being that envelop it. Many spiritual traditions, particularly most Indian philosophical schools, emphasize only the universal aspect of the soul. Sri Aurobindo accepts that while there is a universal aspect to the soul, a part of it, is unique to each individual. This part of the soul, that he terms as the psychic being, is the motor of our terrestrial evolution and our true individual personality (as opposed to the ego personality) that we need to express in order to manifest a Divine life on earth. As explains:

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

Sri Aurobindo adds that while the presence of the psychic being is rarely felt in our ordinary consciousness, through a conscious spiritual discipline, or through successive reincarnations, the psychic being can progressively manifest itself by bringing the outer nature under its direct control. This process of discovering the psychic being and allowing it to integrate and govern the different planes of one's being is termed by Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1970) the psychic transformation. An individual's conscious participation in the evolutionary process begins only with this first step of the psychic transformation.

Integral Transformation

To help individuals to consciously participate in the evolutionary process, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother formulated a spiritual discipline they termed Integral Yoga. The Sanskrit word *yoga* connotes union with the Divine, and Integral Yoga is "so called because it aims at . . . an integral experience of the Divine Reality. . . . Its method is an integral opening of the whole consciousness . . . to that Reality . . . and its integral transformation of the whole nature" (Ghose, 1998a, p. 357).

Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1972a) spells out three steps of progressive self-achievement that lead to the integral transformation. The first is the psychic transformation, which results in the individual acting from the guidance of the psychic being rather than the ego. The next step, often concurrent with the first, is the spiritual transformation, where one remains in an awareness of the universal self that is, in the oneness of all things. The third step is the supramental

transformation, by which the power of the Supermind acts on the individual and transforms him or her into a supramental being.

In India, for thousands of years, different spiritual traditions have advocated different spiritual disciplines leading to liberation from the determinisms of the world. Comparing his path to other disciplines, Sri Aurobindo states:

In the past, it [realization of the Spirit] has been attempted by a drawing away from the world and a disappearance into the height of the Self or Spirit. Sri Aurobindo teaches that a descent of the higher principle is possible which will not merely release the spiritual Self out of the world, but release it in the world . . . and make it possible for the human being to find himself dynamically as well as inwardly and grow out of his still animal humanity into a Diviner race. The psychological discipline of Yoga can be used to that end by opening all the parts of the being to a conversion or transformation through the descent and working of the higher still concealed supramental principle. (Ghose, 1972b, p. 96)

In short, Integral Yoga seeks not a renunciation of life and liberation from the world but a transformation of life and the world; not a rejection of the different egoistic parts of one's being but a transformation and integration of those parts into a Divine nature.

“This, however,” Sri Aurobindo warns, “cannot be done at once. . . . For there are several ranges of consciousness between the ordinary human mind and the supramental truth-consciousness. . . . [that] have to be opened up and their power brought down” (Ghose, 1972b, p. 96). To help in this laborious process of a spiritual transformation through yoga, Sri Aurobindo emphasizes the need for a constant aspiration for the Divine, for a total rejection of one's egoistic desires and a complete surrender to the Divine supramental force. Surrender is an important aspect in Sri Aurobindo's yoga, for it is believed that the individual

with his limited consciousness cannot achieve the supramental consciousness on his own. It is only by the descent of the Divine power from the supramental plane that the supramental transformation can be accomplished. Besides, as was mentioned earlier, in Sri Aurobindo's perception the power of the individual is limited while that of the Supermind is infinite. And thus, the easiest way for individuals to progress on the spiritual path and to transform themselves is to surrender, through the prayer and psycho-spiritual practices, to the working of the Supermind—the highest power of the Divine. Disciples of Sri Aurobindo see the Mother as a personification of the Divine force to whom they make their surrender, and they refer to the Mother's force as the supramental force acting in the world.

At the same time, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, unlike most other spiritual disciplines, gives immense freedom to individuals to pursue their inner self-development according to their nature. This tenet of Integral Yoga stems from the belief that each human being embodies a true individual nature in his or her psychic being that he or she needs to express in the world, and one helps in the supramental transformation by following one's nature:

Each individual carries in himself [sic] a truth and it is with this truth that he must unite, it is this truth he must live; and in this way the road he follows to realize this truth becomes also the road which will bring him the nearest possible to the transformation. (Alfassa, as cited in Satprem, 1968, p. 353)

As Integral Yoga seeks to bring about a spiritual transformation of life in the material conditions of the earth, utmost importance is given to one's dealing with the material world. This takes many forms: from seeking the perfection of

the body through physical exercise to taking conscious care of the material things one uses, from engaging in regular physical work to cultivating an appreciation for beauty and aesthetics. According to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, matter, despite its inertia and unconsciousness, embodies the Divine consciousness and thus commands utmost respect. They taught that by engaging with the material world consciously, through one's work and activities, one can effect a change in matter. As the Mother explained:

Work is something indispensable for the inner discovery. If one does not work, if one does not put his [sic] consciousness into matter, the latter will never develop. . . . To establish order around oneself helps to bring order within oneself. (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 213-214)

Similarly the body, the material basis of existence, is regarded as an instrument of the Divine that has to be perfected through disciplined physical education so that it can embody a higher consciousness. The cultivation of beauty in one's physical surroundings stems from the fact that "in the physical world, of all things it is beauty that best expresses the Divine. . . Beauty interprets, expresses, manifests the Eternal" (Alfassa, 1978, p. 234).

A Collective Yoga

As has been mentioned earlier, Integral Yoga does not stop at the individual realization but seeks a transformation of earthly nature:

For this transformation to succeed, all human beings—even all living beings as well as their material environment—must be transformed. Otherwise things will remain as they are: an individual experience cannot change terrestrial life. . . . Not only an individual or a group of individuals, or even all individuals, but life. . . . has to be transformed. Without such a transformation we shall continue having the same misery, the same calamities and the same atrocities in the world. A few individuals will

escape from it by their psychic development, but the general mass will remain in the same state of misery. (Ghose, 1970, p. 316)

It is believed that each individual who takes up the yoga represents a certain universal psychological difficulty that needs to be transformed, and if the transformation is achieved in one individual, then that has an effect on the whole of humanity. Supporting such a belief, the evolutionary scientist Rupert Sheldrake postulates that if “one member of a biological species learns a new behavior, the morphogenic field for the species changes, even if very slightly. If the behavior is repeated long enough, its ‘morphic resonance’ builds up and begins to affect the entire species” (as cited in Russell, 1995, p. 316). A corollary to this belief is the fact that the transformation cannot be carried out by a single individual, since he or she represents only one particular type of personality. In order to achieve a complete transformation of human nature, all personality-types need to be represented in this collective yoga for humanity. States the Mother, “by the very nature of things, it [the supramental transformation] is a collective ideal that calls for a collective effort so that it may be realized in the terms of an integral human perfection” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 210).

For the individual practitioner of Integral Yoga there comes a point where one no longer does the yoga for oneself—one’s yoga has an effect on the whole world. Calling his yoga “yoga for the earth-consciousness,” Sri Aurobindo says:

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

disorder, but to conquer them as representatives of the same adverse and inexhaustible forces in the world. (Ghose, 1990, p. 77)

This collective aspect of Integral Yoga needs to be differentiated from the contemporary enchantment with community living by many Western spiritual seekers. A collective yoga, or even a collective effort for transformation, does not necessarily imply that the practitioners of Integral Yoga have to do things together in their outer, daily life. Visitors are thus often dismayed by the seeming lack of community in Auroville—that there are no shared spiritual practices and few community rituals or celebrations. Elaborating on the idea of true community, the Mother says:

One of the most common types of human collectivity—to group together . . . around a ideal . . . but in an artificial way. In contrast to this . . . a true community can be based only upon the inner realization of each one of its members. (Alfassa, 1979, p. 107)^{xvii}

The individual's inner growth expresses itself naturally through the collective.

Human Unity

Complementary to the idea of collective yoga is Sri Aurobindo's ideal for an actual human unity. For Sri Aurobindo, the ideal of human unity stems from the fact that underlying all appearances, "there is a secret spirit, a Divine reality [the One Self, or Sachchidananda], in which we are all one" (Ghose, 1971, p. 577). He says that if one were to start from this spiritual premise of unity, then there would be "free room for the realization of the highest human dreams, for the perfectibility of the race, a perfect society, a higher upward evolution of the human soul and human nature" (p. 585). Sri Aurobindo holds that a mere intellectual belief in human unity is doomed to failure, for actual human unity can

only be achieved by the progressive spiritual realization of the oneness of the whole universe. The spiritual ideal of human unity does not mean a homogenization or outward uniformity, but rather a unity that celebrates the essential diversity of all creation. For Sri Aurobindo, each individual in his/her psychic being, represents a unique aspect of the infinite diversity of the Divine. Integral Yoga then is a process by which an individual manifests the unique Divine personality within him/her, and by doing so finds his/her place in the ordered harmony of the supramental creation. An “actual human unity”, as envisioned for Auroville, essentially implies a spiritual society where individuals manifest their psychic beings. Elaborating on his ideas of “a perfect society,” Sri Aurobindo says:

A spiritual society would treat in its sociology the individual, from the saint to the criminal, not as units of a social problem to be passed through some skillfully devised machinery and either flattened into the social mould or crushed out of it, but as souls suffering and entangled in a net and to be rescued, souls growing and to be encouraged to grow, souls grown and from whom help and power can be drawn by the lesser spirits who are not yet adult. (Ghose, 1971, p. 257)

Sri Aurobindo also believed that if this spiritual ideal of human unity was not taken up in one form or the other, then there could be disastrous consequences for the whole race. Reportedly communicating to the Mother from an occult plane, Sri Aurobindo said that the manifestation of Auroville would be “a practical means creating a human unity that would be strong enough to fight against war” (Alfassa, 1991, p. 222).

It is debatable, however, how far the philosophical ideas of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are understood, let alone practiced in Auroville. A recent study of

101 Aurovilians and Newcomers^{xviii} showed that 77% of the respondents practice or try to practice Integral Yoga, 11% replied that they practice another yoga, and 7% said that they do not practice any yoga at all. 6% of the respondents admitted to not having read any literature about or by Sri Aurobindo or the Mother (Carel, 2006). Yet, as many would argue, a cognitive understanding of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's philosophy, or even a commitment to the practice of Integral Yoga, is not a requirement for joining Auroville. As the Mother proclaimed in her message on February 28, 1968, the foundation day of Auroville, having goodwill is a sufficient quality to become an Aurovilian. It is also commonly believed that, whether Aurovilians consciously practice Integral Yoga or not, each individual has a role to play, for in order to effect a transformation of the human species "humanity should be variously represented" (Ghose, 1970, p. 856). Even those who are committed to the practice of Integral Yoga, or to the manifestation of Auroville's ideals, differ in their interpretation of the ideals and of the practice of the yoga. This is primarily because, as mentioned earlier, Integral Yoga accords immense freedom to individuals to define their own path to the Divine, and secondly, because the Mother did not issue precise and specific guidelines about how to manifest the ideals. So Aurovilians, by necessity, have to experiment and find ways, sometimes contradicting themselves in the process, to put into action the Mother's ideas for Auroville. These ideals of a collective yoga and human unity coalesce into the broader ideal of a spiritual society, which is examined, both generally and specifically in the context of Auroville, in Chapter 6. For the purposes of this dissertation, I take Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother words as

mystical truth-claims that can neither be proven nor disproven by the rational consciousness. I merely analyze, on the basis of my data, how their philosophy affects the life of Aurovilians. Additionally, on the basis of my data, I theorize to the extent that socio-psychological processes of Auroville meet the scientific criteria of evolution.

Physical and Sociological Foundations

Whatever be the ideals that Aurovilians subscribe to, and whatever metaphysical arguments that may or may not be used to justify their being in Auroville, one thing that cannot be disputed is that the social psychology of the community of Auroville is derived from the social interactions of individuals, which in some measure accrue from the physical layout of the town and the opportunities it provides for social encounters. So here, I firstly describe the physical reality and layout of Auroville and some of its more important public places and make general observations about the kinds of social encounters that take place in these places. Secondly, as economy and governance directly impact individuals and the collective, I give an overview of Auroville's ideals about economy and governance and describe current economic and organizational structures. Finally, I make some general observations about Auroville's culture. More detailed observations about the social psychology as revealed in the dialectic of the individual and the collective are made in subsequent chapters.

Physical Foundations

Auroville, envisioned to be a city that is over 50% green, is laid out in a circular form over a total area of 20 square kilometers with the Peace Area, where

Matrimandir is located, at its center. The inner city area is divided into four spiraling zones separated by parks. Radiating roughly from the east to the west, these zones are respectively, the residential, the cultural, the industrial and the international zones. Surrounding this inner city area is a green belt of farms and forests (Auroville Foundation, 2001). While this approved layout of the city is increasingly enforced in determining building sites, in reality there are no markers to differentiate between the different zones, or even to distinguish the green belt from the inner city area. In terms of the social representation¹⁹ of the city, the town-planning zones are not part of Aurovilians' perceived reality as they move about Auroville.

For the casual visitor, the physical environment and layout of Auroville is extremely challenging and perplexing. The confusion begins with the fact that Auroville is not located in a contiguous area but comprises over 100 dispersed settlements. These settlements, especially those located in the green belt, are divided from each other by large open spaces, trees, private properties, village farms, public roads and entire villages. Adding to the confusion is the fact that Auroville Information Service publishes and distributes maps where the proposed circular layout of the city is superimposed on the actual area in the form of concentric circles and the lands actually owned by Auroville are marked out in green. Visitors have constantly reported that it is extremely difficult to navigate through Auroville with the help of this map. The challenge stems from the fact that within Auroville there are no paved roads, very few directional markers, and some of the dirt roads and tracks—especially those located in the forests—are just

not marked on the map. Also, some outlying settlements, a good 6-8 km from Matrimandir, do not even find a place on the map.

The Matrimandir

At the centre of Auroville is Matrimandir, which literally means the temple or shrine of the Mother. Though *mandir* is a common Sanskrit/Hindi term in India for a temple, hundreds of Indian tourists who throng each day to Auroville to see the Matrimandir must be undoubtedly surprised to discover that this sacred building does not resemble any of ancient India's ornately sculpted, towering temples. The Matrimandir is a huge, spherical building, the outer walls of which are covered by large, gold-plated, concave discs. Insisting that religions had no place in Auroville and that no religious symbols be used in the Matrimandir, the Mother clarified that the Matrimandir was dedicated not to her but to "the principle of the Mother" (1980, p. 258). The principle of the Mother is the feminine, creative energy revered in the Hindu culture as *Śaktī* and associated in Sri Aurobindo's writing with the Divine, evolutionary force.

Built, as precisely as possible, according to the instructions of the Mother (who had a series of visions about the building) the Matrimandir is regarded as "the soul of Auroville" (Alfassa, 1980, p. 229), and its location at the very center of the city, amidst gardens that are still being designed, reinforces this meaning. In keeping with Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's vision, the Matrimandir symbolizes a new world, in the words of an Aurovilian author "a golden, supramental world . . . breaking out of the Matter as we know it, out of the Earth as it is now (Van Vrekhem, 2000, p. 524).

A technological masterpiece, the Matrimandir, like the Great Pyramid at Giza, incorporates, in its architectural dimensions and use of symbols, many aspects of sacred geometry (Doctor, n.d.). Inside is a meditation chamber, which is accessed via sloped ramps, marble entrances, winding staircases and spiraling walkways in the form of a double-helix. The meditation chamber is built out of imported fine white marble. It is referred to as the inner chamber by Aurovilians, for there are 12 other meditation chambers being built into the sloped structure forming the outer periphery of Matrimandir. The room is dome-shaped with an opening in its vaulted roof through which is directed a ray of sunlight. The ray of sunlight strikes a large crystal-glass globe, which sits on a four-sided, gold-plated base of Sri Aurobindo's symbol, at the centre of the room. Located at a halfway distance between the walls and the crystal is a circle of 12 white pillars. Meditators sit in silence on white cushions placed in concentric circles around the center. Currently, the building is open daily to visitors for an hour in the afternoons. Aurovilians have access to the inner chamber for meditation during early morning and in the evening. The Mother's statements indicate that the Matrimandir is a symbol of humankind's collective aspiration for the Divine, and that the inner meditation chamber is a place for people to concentrate and find their consciousness.

Pillai (2005), detailing an incident, points out how despite the sacredness accorded to the building, individual Aurovilians also make use of the Matrimandir environs for other purposes—the particular case noted by Pillai being a romantic tryst. In general, however, I would say that the sanctity of the Matrimandir and its

manicured gardens is zealously protected by the Matrimandir management team, who have both volunteers and hired watchmen to monitor peoples' behavior in and around Matrimandir. Indeed, one of my interviewees, Carol, a woman who had grown up in Auroville, recollected how deeply she was hurt when she was refused permission to host a Christmas gathering for young children in the Matrimandir precincts. Such an event was deemed as being too secular, noisy and boisterous for the sacred place.

In contrast to the multivalent meanings that the ideals of Auroville have for individuals, the significance of the Matrimandir is not open to contesting interpretations. Unlike the layout of the city, which is publicly and hotly debated, the significance of the Matrimandir is rarely put to question in public, though here too, as with everything else in Auroville and as examined Chapter 6, there are differences in views and opinions among individuals.

The Matrimandir is not a place for social interactions, but it undoubtedly serves as an anchoring force to those individuals who use the chamber for meditation, reinforcing perhaps their commitment to live in Auroville. It is also likely, though it is never openly discussed, that the few people who meditate regularly feel a certain *ideological communitas*^{xix} among themselves by virtue of the fact that they somehow all have a need to invest their lives with a transpersonal meaning, even though this meaning is accessed and interpreted differently by each individual.

This feeling of ideological communitas is more evident in collective rituals such as the tri-annual bonfire before dawn at the amphitheatre near

Matrimandir. New Year's day, Auroville's birthday, and Sri Aurobindo's birthday are celebrated each year by a silent gathering around a huge, ceremonial fire adjacent to the urn that contains the soil of the different nations of the world. This ritualistic event is reminiscent of the foundation-day ceremony, and for many Aurovilians it serves as an occasion to remind themselves of the spiritual vision of Auroville. As the fire dies out and the day grows brighter, most Aurovilians take the opportunity to greet and embrace one another. Not all Aurovilians attend the event, but those who do feel a sense of community and of belonging to something bigger than themselves, as was mentioned to me by some of my interviewees.

The Settlements

The population density of Auroville currently averages to about 20-40 people in a settlement in the residential zone and 2-10 people in a farm or forest settlements. At this density, Auroville has a suburban quality to it, and for most visitors calling it a city is a stretch of imagination. The names of the settlements, some of which were given by the Mother, reflect Auroville's values, such as "Aspiration," "Hope," "Courage," "Grace," "Bliss," "Gratitude," "Progress," and "Adventure," though there is a standing joke in the community of how the people living in these settlements depict the exact opposite virtue. There is perhaps some truth behind this popular yarn in that, according to both Mother and certain Jungian interpretations, every ideal is co-existent with its shadow, which represents the very antithesis of the cherished value. These settlements are largely self-organized in terms of dealing with water supply, waste management, and use of common infrastructure or spaces within the settlement. Most operate as

friendly neighborhoods where the residents run into each other as they go about their daily life. Only a couple of these settlements operate as intentional communities where the residents eat together in a common kitchen or come together for other activities. The settlements are also greatly varied in their architectural style, from luxurious villas surrounded by beautiful gardens to apartment blocks.

Aurovilians largely lead autonomous lives but interact with each other constantly in certain public spaces as they would in any small town. In recent years, the number of public spaces in the form of cafeterias has greatly increased allowing for both casual encounters and planned appointments. These face-to-face interactions foster a sense of community in this otherwise dispersed society.

While daily life and pressure of work varies from individual to individual, for the most part life in Auroville has a laid-back quality to it, especially when contrasted with the frenetic pace of modern cities. As is perhaps true of any small community, people take the time to stop, sometimes right in the middle of the road, to greet friends and catch up with each other's lives.

Public Buildings

One of the foremost places for people to meet is the Solar Kitchen, a collective eatery, which serves vegetarian meals, both Western and South Indian, to around 1,000 Aurovilians and visitors daily. While the meals are reasonably priced, the Solar Kitchen is not a community kitchen in that it does not receive subsidies or regular grants from the community for its operational costs. The Solar Kitchen has a steady influx of regular customers who sign up on a monthly

basis, grateful for this convenient facility. For many, the lunch hour is primarily the time to socialize, and there are regular groups of friends who tend to eat together at the Solar Kitchen. As until very recently cell phones were not common in Auroville, lunch hour in the Solar Kitchen provided one with the opportunity to contact a busy Aurovilian that one needed to meet up with.

For a community of its size, Auroville surprisingly has a number of meeting places, theatres and other performance facilities. The Sri Aurobindo Auditorium at Bharat Nivas, with a seating capacity of 850, is used for cultural performances or formal addresses by visiting dignitaries, while the Town Hall offers a fully equipped conference room for working groups to host smaller meetings and conferences. Kalabhoomi, in the cultural zone, offers studios for artists and open-air stages for live music performances. There are a few halls for exhibiting art-work, and a couple of cinema theatres that screen films daily. All cultural performances in Auroville are offered to the public for free in accordance with the ideal given by the Mother that status or financial means should not restrict individuals from enjoying art (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94).

Similarly, given the Mother's emphasis on the development of the physical body as a crucial element in the integral, spiritual development of a human being, Auroville boasts a number of sports facilities, and most Aurovilians subscribe to a regular regimen of physical exercise. For school-going children, daily exercise and team sports are a mandatory part of their education. Among the older Aurovilians, tennis, basketball and, to a lesser extent, football and badminton are popular games. Others participate in various classes, such as

aerobics, pilates, hatha yoga and dance. A gymnasium and a public swimming pool are recent welcome additions to the community's facilities.

Interestingly, while these collective facilities offer a number of opportunities for people to interact with each other, and while, as was mentioned to me by one woman, there is a certain joy in meeting the same people at the same time in a class or being part of the same dance group, it is rare that people develop deep friendships at such encounters. My observation shows that Aurovilians, after being in a class together or even after a cultural performance, do not tend to linger afterwards but rush back home. As living in a small town like Auroville means that one constantly encounters the same group of people everywhere, many individuals value privacy. A couple of young Aurovilians expressed how nice it was to go “outside,” to be back in the West, where one was anonymous. As would be expected elsewhere, friendships are built over time, primarily among those who work together. A significant difference between Auroville and other mainstream societies is that, ever so often, individuals—even individuals who at one point were antagonistic to one another—come together to implement a collective, voluntary project. Working together for a common good provides an opportunity for people to transcend their differences and get to know one another afresh.

The Sri Aurobindo World Centre of Human Unity building, better known by its acronym SAWCHU, offers a circular, semi-open space for residents' meetings. Residents' meetings are called by the Auroville Council or the Working Committee to inform, discuss and solicit opinions generally, with a view towards

decision-making on issues that affect the whole community, such as the economy, housing, and organization. These meetings, which bring together a diverse group of people, are very often raucous, emotionally charged, and dominated by a few individuals who tend to accuse the working groups of unfair practices. My interviewees, some of whom came together for a focus-group interview, all reported that because of the palpable negativity expressed at such meetings, they hardly attended them anymore, as they have learnt over time that it is almost impossible to reach a decision by consensus at such residents' meetings, given the size of the group, the lack of informed viewpoints, and the diversity of opinions expressed. Decisions are now undertaken by majority vote, but the residents' meetings, apart from giving out information, also serve as some sort of group therapy by allowing people to openly vent their dissatisfaction and frustration at the practices or processes of the community.

Sociological Foundations

Auroville's Economy

Ideally speaking, and as with all other activities, economic activities in Auroville are meant to support the spiritual growth and fulfillment of individual and to serve the community—and not for material gain. At the collective level, Auroville's economy has been constantly experimented with in order to bring its functioning closer to its ideals. As explicitly stated by the Mother (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94), every Aurovilian, according to their capacity, is expected to contribute to the collective welfare through work, in kind and/or with money. In exchange, the community tries to look after the material needs of its residents. These two

principles—of voluntary contributions and of collectively meeting individuals' needs, as far as possible, in kind—have been central to all collective experiments with the Auroville economy, and all immovable funds and assets have been always jointly held by the community and not by individual Aurovilians in keeping with ideal from the Charter that “Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 199). Today, within Auroville, there are three main parallel economies:

1. A collective economy, the units of which provide mainly goods and services for the maintenance and development of the township. These units, employing about half of the population of Auroville, cover a wide range of activities including forestry, farming, education, municipal services, and basic needs such as nutrition, healthcare, clothing and hairdressing. These units operate on a non-profit basis and its costs are either collectively met through a centrally organized fund, or through charges borne by users. Part of this economy is the “Central Fund,” started in 1989, to collectively and more efficiently support these service units. The Central Fund receives a monthly contribution from each self-supporting Aurovillian of Rs. 1,500 (US \$40 approximately) and a fixed daily amount from guests visiting Auroville. Salaries, called “maintenances,” of Rs. 1,500-Rs. 5,000 (US \$40-\$125) are distributed by the Central Fund to about 600 people working in these service units.
2. A commercial economy comprising business units organized as trusts under the collective organizational structure of the Auroville Foundation.

The objectives of the units vary with their size and market, with some being no more than a one-person venture with access only to the local Auroville market. The larger and more successful units cater to an export market and pay much higher salaries. These units function largely autonomously on a daily basis and making at least some profit is a common aim. A third of the profits of these commercial units are expected to be channeled back as donations to the community.

3. An “in kind” economy, consisting of monetary and labor contributions by Aurovilians, in addition to their specific activities or formal financial contributions. This could take the form of development and maintenance of houses and infrastructure as well as donations, in cash or kind, to fellow Aurovilians in need. This is an important but informal economy but one that has so far never been accurately quantified.

Closely affecting the Auroville economy is the local economy of the surrounding villages and the regional Indian economy with its concentration in Pondicherry. The local economy provides raw materials, food produce and, very significantly, the labor of about 4,000 local people employed by individual Aurovilians. Apart from the income generated within Auroville, considerable funds come into Auroville for specific purposes from India and abroad in the form of individual and institutional donations. Also, many Aurovilians are self-supporting and do not have to earn their living through their work at Auroville.

Auroville's Governing Organizations

In order to allow the Divine force to freely express itself in the manifestation of Auroville, the Mother was always extremely reluctant to give a definitive shape to Auroville's governing organizations. She sought "to replace the mental government of intelligence by the government of a spiritualized consciousness", stating that "it's the highest consciousness that sees the most clearly . . . what the needs of the most material thing should be" (Alfassa, 1995, p. 107). Terming the ideal political organization of Auroville "Divine anarchy," the Mother explains that "the anarchic state is the self-government of each individual, and it will be the perfect government only when each one becomes conscious of the inner Divine and will obey only him [sic] and him alone" (Alfassa, 2000, p. 76). The inner Divine to which the Mother refers is the psychic being and, when people are conscious of it, they can "organize themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws" (Alfassa, 1980, p. 225). Recognizing that manifesting such a spiritual organization in Auroville was a difficult task, however, the Mother time and again expressed her faith in the evolutionary Divine force to work out things in its own way. She envisaged a small group with "intuitive intelligence" (people with "an intuition that manifests intellectually") (Alfassa, 1980, p. 280) governing Auroville, where no single person would be representative of the spiritual consciousness, though she later clarified that in the absence of such a group, the Divine force would act on the whole group. The Mother's idea of a "hierarchical organization grouped around the most enlightened centre and submitting to a collective discipline" (1980, p. 210) is elaborated in a text entitled "The Dream"

in which the Mother says, “in the general organization intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority will find expression not in the enhancement of the pleasures and the powers of life but in the increase of duties and responsibilities” (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94).

In my view, the present-day reality of Auroville seems far away from the spiritual organization envisioned by the Mother, with none of the Aurovilians yet having this greater spiritual authority of which the Mother speaks. Besides, as of 1988, Auroville has been subject to an Act of the Indian Parliament that requires it to have a three-tier governing body called the Auroville Foundation headed by a chairman. The three tiers of the Auroville Foundation are: (a) the Governing Board comprising eminent Indians; (b) an International Advisory Council constituted of men and women from various countries who have distinguished themselves professionally in the international arena; and (c) the Working Committee, an elected body representing the Residents’ Assembly, which comprises Aurovilians above the age of eighteen. The first two groups are nominated by the Government of India for a specific period of time, and to handle work on a daily basis, the government also appoints a high-ranking administrative officer called the Secretary.

Legally, and much to their consternation, Aurovilians have recently found out that most of the power is concentrated in the hands of the Chairman of Auroville Foundation, a nominee of the Government of India, but so far, for all practical purposes, the Residents’ Assembly is given full freedom to organize its governance in any way it chooses. At present Auroville is governed by a number

of different working groups, such as a town-planning group, a housing service, an educational board, a funds and assets management group, an entry group and so forth that, on the whole, have the support of the community. Most of these groups have a term of office and the notes of the meetings are publicly available.

Governance depends on the goodwill and cooperation of the residents, for there are practically no collective mechanisms, such as recourse to law or police force, by which to enforce decisions. For important issues that affect all Aurovilians, the Working Committee or the Executive Council (an internal administrative body) can call general meetings of the Residents' Assembly. Decision-making at these Residents' Assemblies used to be a lengthy, cumbersome and frustrating process, but as of 2007 the community has put a voting system in place by which to make decisions. Apart from these officially recognized bodies, there are other smaller experimental forms of organization where groups of people collectively come together to try and meet a common need. As can well be imagined, it is quite a challenge to govern an ever-growing and changing township.

Auroville's Culture

Given Auroville's ideal to go beyond one's cultural conditioning as stated in the text "To be a True Aurovilian" (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200) most Aurovilians, by their very immigration to Auroville, seem to resist explicitly or implicitly the culture^{xx} of their birth. Children born in Auroville are often of mixed parentage and dual nationalities, and by virtue of being raised in India develop a multicultural outlook. Over the years, a pan-Aurovilian culture has developed in Auroville, but this culture is heavily influenced by Euro-American

traditions. Dress codes, food, language (English is the common language in Auroville), material products, and even values such as independence, gender equality and assertiveness are largely the influence of Western culture. Marginal elements of the local south Indian culture creep into the life in Auroville only in the form of selected practices, such as drawing *kolams* (sacred geometrical patterns on the floor that are drawn daily in the Tamil culture) during celebrations and festive occasions. The Westernization of Auroville is surprising given its location in India and the fact that the largest percentage of its population is from India itself, drawn from the local villages. It would be too simplistic, however, to assume a cultural superiority on the part of Westerners, or internal colonization on the part of Indians, to account for this phenomenon, for many Westerners made commendable attempts to embrace the local culture.

In the early years, the pioneering group of Western Aurovilians who worked almost exclusively on land restoration adopted the informal clothing (the loin-cloth and the *lungī* of the villagers and had the same food base of locally grown grains. Over time, as Aurovilians found that they had to enter into complicated negotiations with government officials and the like, they reverted back to formal clothing in terms of shirts and pants. Shorts are popular in Auroville among all cultural groups and for all genders, because they are most well-suited to this hot, dusty climate and for riding motorcycles, the common mode of transport in Auroville. Similarly, food is one of the mostly deeply ingrained cultural habits, and so it was only natural that Westerners eventually resorted to Euro-American cuisine. As one German Aurovillian once told me, he

would not have been able to stay in Auroville if the Germans had not set up the bakery and provided him with a daily staple of good, brown bread. Discussion of outer cultural habits such as food and clothing are perhaps superfluous in today's globalized world. The economic colonization of India by the West is highly noticeable in Auroville and its surrounding villages, as demonstrated by teenagers who can be seen drinking cokes and sporting blue jeans (regardless of the impracticality of such clothing in the tropical climate).

As for the more subtle cultural values and practices, such as the ways in which meetings are conducted in Auroville and the values that are cherished, it is undeniable that these, too, are Westernized, for, by and large, Western Aurovilians have taken the lead in organizing, manifesting, and managing the various activities of Auroville. The usually younger, less educated, local population of Tamil Aurovilians has so far been willing to follow their lead, but in recent years the Tamil segment of Auroville's population has been asserting their right to have a say in Auroville's organization. It is because of their efforts that Auroville is slowly making an effort to be bi-lingual, with public information being made available in both Tamil and English.

In Chapter 5, I examine in more detail the complex relationship between culture, power, and identity formation. Here, I would just like to offer my observation that while Aurovilians, inspired by the transpersonal ideal of Auroville's participation in creating a new world, have in many ways rejected their native societies and cultures, the cultural traits of their birth and upbringing are often pushed into the unconscious both at the individual and collective level,

surfacing sometimes unexpectedly during argumentative social interactions, or in other emotionally charged situations. As Jung (1964) explains, any part of the individual personality or social culture that has been ignored, unacknowledged, and/or consciously or unconsciously repressed forms a shadow in the individual and the collective, and by the very psychological drive towards integration, this collective shadow seeks to express itself, often through reprehensible social acts, to counterbalance the dominant social zeitgeist. As a multicultural society that brings together both former colonizers (Western Aurovilians) and former colonized subjects (Indian Aurovilians), Auroville is a fascinating study of what Jungian analysts Singer and Kimbles (2004) term as the *cultural complex*—a group complex that is expressed as an intense collective emotion and arises out of a shared cultural unconscious in interactions with other social groups. While researching intergroup relations is not the main aim of my study, I posit that cultural complexes exist in Auroville among the different segments of its society, and these need to be acknowledged and integrated before Auroville can truly embody its ideal and manifest an actual human unity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

My own fascination with Auroville began in early childhood. My parents would visit the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry regularly during summer holidays, and we would all go to Auroville on guided tours arranged by the Ashram. In those days, in the early 1970s, one could not but be fascinated by the idealism and endurance of a bunch of crazy, wild-haired *vellākārās* [Tamil for foreigners], sweating it out under the hot tropical sun, putting up fences, digging holes, planting trees on a desolate, windswept plateau. I joined Auroville in 1994 as a young adult driven by the same heady idealism of wanting to help in the building of a better world, but over the years, the day-to-day challenges of living in an amorphous, unstructured community tempered my idealism. Also, I hankered for philosophical knowledge, for intellectual pursuits, that this pragmatic, down-to-earth community just could not provide. By 2002 I had withdrawn from most of my community responsibilities, and I was leading a monastic life, studying and writing alone in the privacy of my home. Finally, in 2005 I decided to leave Auroville to pursue doctoral studies at California Institute of Integral Studies, but my fascination with Auroville never ended. What inspires people to continue to live there, day-in and day-out, under a harsh (hot and humid) climate, donating most, if not all their resources, to build an idealistic city that in all likelihood will never be completed in their lifetime? What are the joys and the frustrations of such a life? And what does the Auroville experience have to tell us about human nature and social living? It was questions such as these that led me to undertake a qualitative study on Auroville.

Central to my interest in Auroville and Aurovilians was my own belief, born out of my understanding of Integral Yoga and transpersonal psychology, that the world and the self comprised a multidimensional reality that could not be fully described by objective analyses. So rather than seeking to analyze the social experiment of Auroville within a single structured framework, I adopted a transdisciplinary attitude that sought to recognize and describe, to the extent possible, the various dimensions of existence.

As a researcher I seek to combine, as Ferrer and Sherman (2008) advocate, an attitude of critical detachment with participatory engagement. In addition to the growing number of feminist, transpersonal and postmodern scholars who question the epistemic authority of critical rationality (e.g., see Braud and Anderson, 1998; Flood, 1999; Jaggar, 1990), I hold that such an attitude of both participating in life, which is relational by nature, and critically observing the dynamics of one's relationships is intrinsic to the multidimensional reality of human consciousness. I particularly maintain that given the aim of qualitative research to understand and describe life (Merriam & Associates, 2002), the ability to differentiate between objective and subjective perspectives and skillfully integrate them is essential to the legitimacy of the research project.

On the issue of subjectivity, an increasing number of theorists and qualitative researchers, following the paradigmatic shift from classical physics to quantum physics, opine that it is neither possible nor desirable that the researcher's influence be completely eliminated. For instance, the quantum physicist-turned-philosopher Basarab Nicolescu points out that it is only the

subjective self who can comprehend the complexity of “finite realm with its infinite dimensions” (2002, p. 38), and Peshkin (1988) upholds subjectivity as being “virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 18). Finally, participatory philosophy (Skolimowski, 1994) and participatory epistemology (Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) recognize and advocate the interdependence of the objective and the subjective.

While I use qualitative methodology to conduct my research, in the interpretation of my data I adopt a more *transdisciplinary approach* that seeks to engage with and ultimately transcend the various disciplines of sociology, anthropology, social psychology and transpersonal psychology to give a coherent picture of Auroville as an emerging spiritual society in the larger context of a world that is itself evolving to embody a higher, spiritual consciousness. While the evolution of human consciousness within societies can be fruitfully studied under different disciplines employing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, I believe that the subject, perhaps more so than others, demands a transdisciplinary approach^{xxi} given the pressing social and environmental challenges of the contemporary world. As Nicolescu explains:

Social complexity emphasizes the complexity that invades all areas of knowledge. . . . The simplistic idea of a just society, founded on a scientific ideology and the creation of a new man, is unraveling under the pull of a multidimensional complexity. (2002, p. 37)

I see both Auroville and this analysis of Auroville's social psychology as being informed by the vision of transdisciplinarity with its inter-related goals of understanding the present world by engaging with it.

Such a transdisciplinary approach also necessitated the undertaking of an extensive theoretical study of relevant literature in various disciplines. Instead of limiting myself to a qualitative analysis of my data and a description of Auroville's social psychology on the basis of my findings, I sought to understand the lived experience of Aurovilians in the light of other documented studies in communal living. Consequently, first of all, I engage with sociological and anthropological theories that explore social psychological processes in the building of community and the ways in which intentional communities act as a counterpoint to mainstream society challenging the values of the latter. Secondly, by noting that Auroville is not just a commune but a wider social experiment with a potential relevance for all of humanity, I study relevant sociological theories focusing particularly on social identity theory (Tajfel & J. C. Turner, 1986) to understand certain aspects of group behavior among Aurovilians. Thirdly, validating Auroville's intention to be a city with a spiritual mission—that of consciously participating in the evolutionary process to bring about a spiritual transformation—I engage with theories of social evolution and data on the emergence of spirituality in contemporary society analyzing my research findings in the light of this body of literature. In this context, I also delineate the properties of an evolutionary system as identified by systems theory and examine, on the basis of my data, the extent to which Auroville can be termed as an evolutionary

system. On the basis of my qualitative findings, I advance the theoretical hypothesis that spiritual ideals when adopted freely by the individual act as powerful catalysts in furthering the evolution of human consciousness.

In short, because of the engagement with the real world that is inherent in transdisciplinarity, I do not limit myself to a qualitative analysis and description to the social psychology of Auroville; I undertake a thorough theoretical study of relevant concepts about human societies and present my research findings in the context of these theoretical concepts. My transdisciplinary approach integrates a rigorous qualitative study, which is described below, with an equally comprehensive theoretical study that engages and furthers certain prevalent concepts in the evolution of consciousness in societies.

Outline of the Qualitative Study

The study uses *basic interpretive qualitative methodology* to explore the relationship between spiritual ideals subjectively held by Aurovilians and the following facets of the social psychology of Auroville: the dialectic between the individual and the collective, intersubjective challenges and joys (identified by the research participants), and potential collective shadow issues (identified by the researcher).

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To determine, through a community-wide survey, the intersubjective challenges and joys that arise for the individual in the lived context of the Auroville community.

2. To discover what spiritual ideals research participants personally subscribe to in the context of manifesting the transpersonal vision of Auroville.
3. To understand how the research participants experience the dialectic between the individual and the collective.
4. To understand the relationship, if any, between the social psychology of Auroville and its spiritual ideals.
5. To identify implicit shadow issues, if any, in the challenges reported above.

Choice of Methodology

The particular qualitative methodology selected for this study is basic interpretive qualitative research. Basic interpretive qualitative research has been defined as a form of qualitative research that interprets “a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved or a combination of these” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 6). In other words, this methodology allows researchers to approach their study from different perspectives rather than being limited, as in most other qualitative methods, to studying a single situation or an isolated phenomenon. As Merriam and Associates admit, an interpretive stance colors all forms of qualitative research, but while other qualitative methodologies additionally seek to realize other objectives, a basic interpretive qualitative study is content with a generalized interpretation of the lived experience that is being researched. Patton (1990), affirming that the purpose of basic research is to understand and explain, holds that “basic researchers work to generate new theories or test existing theories” (p. 152). Basic research was thus

deemed appropriate for this study as it seeks to understand the relationship between spiritual ideals and social psychology in a transpersonally-oriented community and to possibly generate new theories in the context of social psychology and participatory transpersonal psychology.

A qualitative approach to social psychology demands a certain flexibility to allow for data collection and analyses from multiple perspectives, and hence a basic interpretive methodology is particularly apt for studying social psychology. This flexibility to combine processes and phenomena and to study them from different perspectives is also in keeping with the integral and transpersonal theoretical frameworks of this study.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made for the purposes of this study:

1. Auroville is a transpersonally-oriented community by virtue of its founding spiritual vision.
2. The participants have been drawn to Auroville because of its spiritual vision, and/or have adopted spiritual ideals in consonance with this vision at some point during their stay in Auroville.
3. Individually-held spiritual ideals can be empirically determined by finding out, through a community-wide written survey and interviews, what inspires people to participate in the experiment of Auroville.
4. Individuals experience both joys and/or challenges as they relate to the larger community.

5. Spiritual ideals held by Aurovilians may form shadow issues, and these may be implicit in the challenges faced by the community.
6. The two social groups that have been historically most marginalized in Auroville are Tamil Aurovilians who have joined Auroville from the surrounding villages and youth brought up in Auroville

The Researcher as the Primary Instrument of Research

At first my professor was aghast by my research interests: She thought I did not have sufficient critical distance from my object of study and strongly cautioned that I should not interview people whom I knew personally. It would have been impossible to follow her advice. Having lived and worked as a journalist for *Auroville Today*, the Auroville monthly paper for almost a decade, having actively participated in the community as well as having held certain key positions, such as trustee for the Auroville Village Action Group, I knew almost everybody in this community. But I was keenly aware of the dangers my professor was warning me about—of the researcher being too close to the subject being researched. Creswell (1998), for instance, while reluctantly admitting the advantages of such a situation, strongly cautions—for the sake of objectivity—against the researcher knowing his/her subjects prior to the research.

I feared my own subjectivity: I was afraid that my own personal involvement with Auroville would bias my data collection and interpretation, even though with each year that I spent away from Auroville, my passion for this experiment dimmed, to the extent that today I am ambivalent about my future in this community. To counter my subjectivity I designed a research method,

detailed below, that strove to be as unbiased and anonymous as possible. And periodically throughout the research process, but particularly before and after interviews, I went through a detailed process of bracketing or epoché—reflecting and documenting my own conceptions and feelings about the subject material. Specifically before the interviewing process, I bracketed: (a) my own lived experience of Auroville, (b) my own ideas and feelings about the transpersonal ideals of Auroville, (c) my expectations about the value of the study. Then, just prior to each interview, I bracketed in the form of scribbled notes (a) my expectations of the interview—what I hoped to observe; (b) the outcome of the preceding interviews and the expectations created by them; and (c) any thoughts or feelings I had about my participant based on our previous interactions. To ensure that my interviewees were not negatively biased towards me, I gave all of them the option not to be interviewed by me but by an outside, non-Aurovilian interviewer. None availed themselves of this opportunity.

In the year that I spent in Auroville, 2007, I was careful not to engage in community activities and not to offer my opinion on any polemical issues. While most qualitative researchers participate in the life and activities of the cultures that they research in order to gain acceptance, I had the opposite need—to distance myself from my research participants and maintain a neutral attitude so that I did not alienate any section of the community.

In retrospect, I believe that my role as an insider has helped the research process and not detracted from it. To my participants I was just another Aurovilian, a trusted insider and not an outside researcher. During my decade-

long immersion in Auroville, I had gained the trust of the community. In my long tenure with *Auroville Today*, I had established my credibility as an interviewer, interpreter, and writer of Auroville. All of this was in my favor during the research process. For example, most of my interviewees perfunctorily signed the formally worded consent form, explicitly stating that they just trusted me to do the right thing with all the information that they had shared. Aurovilians would stop me on the road or at public places to apologize for not filling out my survey and to enunciate the reasons for it. Once, months after the survey was over, an old-timer, who had met the Mother and been in Auroville since the early years, approached me in our general store and engaged me in an hour's conversation answering my questions in detail. I gave up on shopping and sat down and transcribed that impromptu interview from memory on scrap pieces of paper as best as I could.

Such a reception to academic researchers, particularly among intentional communities, is rare. Abrams and McCullough, documenting their own research process into British communes, write:

There were dimensions of the life of the group to which we had not been given access, a level of reality that had been carefully protected from scrutiny. . . . In addition we ourselves compounded our own problems of access to communes by our own unavoidable but manifest lack of commitment to their purposes or meanings. (1976, pp. 12-13)

Given my identity as an Aurovillian—living in an Auroville house with an Auroville partner, and having access to all community events as any other Aurovillian—such problems simply did not arise for me. I was uniquely positioned to observe the complexities and subtle nuances of the multi-dimensional,

multicultural life in Auroville. I did not keep my other identity as a social researcher a secret, but neither did I flaunt it. It is inconceivable that an outsider researcher would have been publicly recognized—let alone accepted—by the community as much as I was.

The other major problem in researching intentional communities, communes and the like is that most of them, because of their alternative lifestyle, have been viewed with prejudice by outsiders. As Abrams and McCullough (1976) note, communes have frequently had bad press where they are, usually unjustly, accused of leading a hedonistic and licentious lifestyle. Auroville too has suffered—and continues to suffer—from such ill-informed hack journalism. As a result, most Aurovilians are chary of interviewers, or are simply tired of being looked upon by outsiders as though they were, in the words of one Aurovillian, “in a fishbowl” (Butler, 2002, p. 5). While a few Aurovilians politely refused participation in my study because of their own reservations about academic research, I never encountered wariness or hostility. On the contrary, a number of Aurovilians personally commented that they appreciated the participatory community survey that I did.

I also feel that my worldview, shaped both by my Indian birth and upbringing and a Western education in the form of graduate studies in USA, allowed me greater accessibility to the mindsets of my interviewees who hailed from both India and the West. I found my identity shifting in the course of the research process: As an interviewer in the field, I was a compassionate participant-observer, but back in the privacy of my study, the very process of

analyzing data turned me into a detached social scientist who critically sifted through the mountains of data and tried to decipher their inherent meaning. In the final analysis, it is for the readers to check on my methodology and determine for themselves the trustworthiness of the study's findings. As Braud and Anderson hold: "responsibilities for determining the adequacy of knowledge claims rests in the informed judgments of the investigators and research consumers" (1998, p. 13).

The Research Process

The research was carried out during my year-long stay at Auroville from December 15, 2006 to December 15, 2007. It comprised participant observation of the daily life of the community especially focused on community meetings, informal conversations, formal recorded interviews, a community survey, and the collection and analysis of written documents such as the two community journals, *News and Notes* and *Auroville Today*, and postings on the electronic forum, *AV Net*.

Analysis of Data

The purpose of the research and data analysis was not to generate theory, as in a grounded theory approach, but to understand and interpret the lived experiences of the participants. The social science research technique of content analysis was used to analyze the data. This technique focuses on systematically identifying and interpreting key elements in the content of a communication rather than analyzing or deconstructing the structure of the narrative (Berg, 2003). Unlike the approach of *symbolic interactionism*, which interprets latent content

and symbolic elements inherent in the data, in my basic interpretive approach I limited myself to analyzing and coding *manifest content*, that is, explicit narrative elements present in the data. I chose to do this primarily because I was afraid that my own subjectivity would unduly bias my interpretation of latent content. Secondly, though English is the *lingua franca* of Auroville, it is not the first language of the majority of Aurovilians. So one could easily be misled if one sought to interpret symbolic elements in the use of English language by non-English participants. In contrast, reliance on manifest content of the narratives is justified because, as Butler (2002) points out, story-telling (or sharing narratives), unlike poetry or philosophy, is pan-global having communication as its primary goal. As is common in qualitative research, data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously.

Pilot Study

I had originally envisaged doing a pilot study using my former colleagues at *Auroville Today* as participants. I felt that that was a group I had easy access to. To my utter surprise, my plans completely backfired as one after another of my targeted participants backed out. A couple of them expressed their distrust of academicians and of intellectual analyses. This in itself is not unusual in communal studies. Abrams and McCullough (1976) note that members of intentional communities have deliberately opted for a lifestyle that is not dominated by mainstream, rationalistic thinking and are consequently reluctant to have their lives described by the same limiting process. This problem is compounded in a spiritual community like Auroville where members feel that

one's life, which is perceived as being a spiritual life, should not be shared, for a variety of reasons, with casual observers. As one woman who refused to fill out my survey said, "I am here for my own inner discovery and it is too arrogant and pretentious to speak about such things" (personal communication, July 2, 2007). Another setback was that the research climate seemed to have been spoiled by a previous researcher. An Aurovilian mentioned how she had openly and extensively shared her life with this academic researcher who had then simply disappeared without ever sharing the results of her research with the community.

Two friends who consented, at this initial research phase, to fill out my experimental questionnaire commented that it was far "too wordy." In my desire to keep control of the process and not have spurious, multiple submissions, both my prefatory text and questions were replete with disclaimers and qualifications. I learnt an important lesson: While ensconced in the ivory towers of the university, one thinks only of the need for validating one's data, but in the field one realizes that one's sources of data are not inanimate objects. So one has accordingly to let go of our institutionally conditioned bias for formal objective approaches and relate to one's subjects, as far as possible, in the tone and manner of everyday language. Based on the feedback I got, I greatly simplified my questionnaire. This was particularly important as almost a third of Auroville's population are from the local villages with a low level of literacy and also culturally not used to filling out surveys.

In May and June 2007, I conducted a simplified pilot study by interviewing two women and three men, who comprised two European nationals,

two local, Tamil-speaking Indians, and one American. The selection was largely a random procedure with availability and diversity of the participants being the only criteria. The purpose of the study was to test out my own interviewing skills and the questions that I had designed for a semi-structured interview. The pilot study also helped me to think through, test out and refine my coding and data analysis processes. Data from this pilot study is analyzed and included in my final analysis, but to differentiate participants of the pilot study from the main study, I use letters from A-E to name individuals in the former group, while using pseudonyms for interviewees of the main study.

The Survey

In order to select interviewees a community-wide survey was conducted wherein each Aurovilian was asked to name three individuals—excluding themselves—who they felt, by their work or by their presence, had made a significant contribution to Auroville. By choosing interviewees on the basis of a community-wide survey, the personal bias of the researcher was eliminated, and there was an intersubjective third-person validation in the selection of the participants. Interviewees chosen on this basis were also deemed to be in consonance with and have a certain commitment to the transpersonal vision of Auroville, and their views on the social psychology of Auroville could be regarded as having greater validity than other Aurovilians whose contributions were not regarded as being significant by the community. Additionally, the survey sought to identify the joys and challenges of living in Auroville.

In the first two weeks of July, the survey form (see Appendix D), in English and Tamil, was sent out to all 1,294 Aurovilians who were reported to be part of the Auroville Residents List or Master List according to the Residential Service of Auroville. The Master List is a list of the demographic data of all adult Aurovilians and Newcomers, which includes their residential addresses. To solicit a greater response, the questionnaire was enclosed in an addressed envelope and manually delivered. While anonymity was assured, all the questionnaires were serially numbered to rule out multiple responses. This was important especially as there had been charges of rigging votes in the Auroville electoral process by people submitting multiple entries. Included with the questionnaire was a bookmark with a relevant quote from Sri Aurobindo that explicitly thanked the participant for responding to the survey.^{xxii} This tactic of giving out a priori a token reward helps to increase response rates (Patten, 1998, p. 69). While I had considered other forms of token rewards, such as a coupon for free ice-cream, I decided that a bookmark with a quote from Sri Aurobindo, which underlined the transpersonal importance of community, established my own credibility as a researcher, and I believe helped to evoke a more genuine and serious response from the participants. This was evidenced by at least one response that directly referred to the quote. To collect the responses, boxes were left at three community centers, and additional survey forms were also left alongside these boxes. The survey was also posted on the internet on the AV Net website, and responses by e-mail were solicited, specifically by using a distribution email listserv. To

encourage people to respond, two friendly reminders were posted both on the AV Net and in the weekly communiqué, *News and Notes*.

I encountered a number of challenges beyond my control in the process. First of all, the Master List data, as was later also confirmed by the Auroville Working Committee, was misleading. The reported population of 1,294 was controversial as sometimes minors were mistakenly listed as Aurovilians. Also, addresses had not been updated in the list with the consequence that 49 survey forms were returned back to me. It is entirely possible that there were more forms which were not delivered but which were also not returned back to me. Also, data (again incomplete) from the Residents' Service indicated that at least 262 Aurovilians were out of town. Next, given the participatory approach to governance and town-planning, soliciting opinions of residents by surveys is all too common in Auroville and is considered as burdensome, as one Aurovilian, who could not be bothered to fill out my form, mentioned to me. As it turned out, just a week or so after I had started my survey, the Working Committee sent out an urgent and important survey on decision-making. Multiple surveys targeted at the same population at the same time are likely to discourage responses. Finally, the boxes that I had placed for collecting responses were removed prior to my deadline and without my knowledge at two community centers. Despite all these hurdles, I received 131 responses, over 10% of the actual population contacted, which I feel, given all the affecting factors and parameters, is an acceptable response rate, especially given the fact that I did not choose a random sample of participants but targeted the whole community.^{xxiii}

As I had already envisaged, prior to starting my research, the Tamil population and youth between 18-25 scarcely participated in the survey. Both of these groups have been historically known in Auroville for not belonging to a writing culture: the written word is not their preferred medium for expressing themselves. I first guessed at this fact by a quick analysis of the language used in the responses, and then confirmed my suspicions by meeting with members of these two groups separately. In order to meet the youth, I visited the two residential communities for the youth, Kailash and the Youth Centre, and Future School, Auroville's high school, but there I learnt that this age group of 18-25 actually constitutes a missing generation. At this age most Auroville youth prefer to go out of Auroville to avail higher educational opportunities or to work and travel outside. To solicit opinions from the Tamil segment of the community, I met with the two Tamil women's groups: Meera Women's Group and Collaboration, and had with one of the groups a particularly good oral discussion about the survey questions. Later, after this effort, I received a few more written responses from Tamil women.

Analysis of the Survey

When the survey responses were collated, I found that a total of 159 names had been proposed as potential interviewees. The highest number of votes got by any one single person was just 14, which represents a meager 8.8% of the total votes cast. The first two people with the maximum number of votes were chosen as interviewees for they had considerably more votes than anyone else. Then a random drawing was held to select two more interviewees from all those

who had received more than three votes. Finally, in order to incorporate views from the two marginalized communities I decided to include, regardless of the votes that they garnered in the survey, a Tamil woman and a young, 25-year old Aurovilian, Kalai and Sarah respectively, as interviewees. Again, to reduce personal bias and to stay true to my original intentions, these two women were chosen on the basis of the “snowball effect”—an accepted qualitative research mechanism—where additional participants are proposed to the researcher by the interviewees themselves. The interviewees for the main study pursued different occupations, such as financial manager, artist, high-school teacher, cashier, primary school teacher, and head of an educational institute. All in all, for the main study, I interviewed two men and four women, two of whom are Indian, with a total of five nationalities among the six. These six interviewees will be referred to in this study by the following pseudonyms: Kalai, Sarah, Sonia, Oliver, Swaminathan, and Carol.

The survey results indicate that there are clearly no perceived “leaders” in Auroville. As some participants explicitly stated, they could not name only three Aurovilians who contributed positively to the Auroville experiment, for there were so many who did so. Another mentioned that I could interview just about anybody because all, in one way or the other, contributed to the Auroville experiment. This perspective was interesting as it seemed to corroborate that Auroville’s spiritual path is indeed a collective one and not an individual one. A third person, again regretting her inability to propose just three names, pointed out that at different times of Auroville’s growth, different people have come forward

to take responsibility for any particular issue: “the Force is sometimes with one or the other,” she said (personal communication, January 18, 2007). This belief in a transpersonal force guiding Auroville, with the Aurovilians being instruments of the force, is a highly prevalent belief in the community and in consonance with the Mother’s spiritual vision.

The participants’ responses to the other questions on the survey form were then collated into a related set of documents. The responses were not analyzed on a case by case basis but broken down into manageable bits of data and classified either as *joys* or *challenges*. This classification derived naturally from the two main survey questions: “what do you like about living in Auroville” and “what do you find challenging.” Following Kirby’s (2003) qualitative study of the social vision of an ecovillage in Ithaca, the two categories of joys and challenges were further classified under five headings, namely (a) situational factors, (b) personal factors, (c) interpersonal factors, (d) transpersonal factors, and (e) other factors. The survey responses, thus divided into the categories of joys and challenges, are included as Appendix E and Appendix F respectively.^{xxiv} In a further analytical step, under the category of joys, repeated key words such as *freedom, growth, work, adventure, experiment, Mother’s force* were noted, and further subdivisions were introduced under the headings of personal and interpersonal factors (see Appendix E). It is also important to note that almost all the personal challenges reported by Aurovilians included a transpersonal dimension, and hence these responses are coded as *personal (and transpersonal) factors* (see Appendix F).

In response to the request of some participants, the survey results were posted in four separate postings for two months on the electronic forum AV Net for general discussion by the community. In order not to bias the discussion in any way, I, as the primary researcher, decided not to participate in this electronic discussion but to merely note the responses. While originally this had not been planned in the design of the methodology, I realized this strategy was highly useful, being more participatory-oriented. At least 50 people, and possibly a total of 136 people,^{xxv} checked out one or more of the postings. There were, however, only a few general responses thanking me for my work and no discussion about the data itself. I believe, and as was orally reported to me by one Aurovilian, that this was primarily due to the fact that the people were somewhat inundated by the 20 pages of data. This electronic medium also has its limitations in that it is only a privileged few who have the time and access to the internet to participate in such discussions.

Data collected through the survey about intersubjective challenges cued me to potential collective shadow issues in the community. As Jungian analysts Singer and Kimbles (2004) suggest, within a group, emotionally charged words generally indicate the presence of a complex that constitutes the shadow of the group. The survey results indicated that the maximum number of challenges was reported in the category of “interpersonal challenges within the community.” As is analyzed in subsequent chapters, there is evidently a felt sense of the “lack of *communitas*” in Auroville, and this in turn directly contradicts the community’s central ideal of human unity. The researcher’s hypothesis about the presence of

this shadow issue was confirmed in the discussion during the focus group interview.

The Interviews

To secure individual points of view, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with a total of 11 people in two separate phases, a pilot study of five interviewees before the administration and analysis of the community survey and a main study of six interviewees after the survey was over. The main study comprising six individual interviews and one focus group interview greatly helped in exploring more deeply the issues that had come up in the earlier phases of data collection.

At the focus group interview, all interviewees selected for the main study were invited to discuss the preliminary findings of the researcher particularly focusing on the issues of intersubjective challenges and shadows. Two of the interviewees declined to participate in the focus group interview due to work pressure. It was hard to find a common time that would have suited all six interviewees, and one woman, due to a personal emergency, did not show up at the interview. Additionally, I invited Alan, a former colleague and editor of *Auroville Today*, to co-facilitate the group interview with me. Alan, who has been in Auroville for a long time and is widely respected in the community for his neutral stance, had earlier declined to participate in my research. Having him co-chair the group interview, after having first discussed the purpose of the interview with him, gave me some insight into his own views and also allowed me to take a more passive, observer's stance at the interview.

Analysis of the Interviews

The digitally-recorded interviews were manually transcribed, and a software program called Hyperresearch 2.8 was used to help with the management, organization coding, and analysis of data. In both the collection and analysis of the data, I was phenomenologically oriented in that the subjective meaning that the participants gave to their experience was treated as reality. Using the constant comparative analysis method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), codes or categories for organizing the data were inductively derived from the data itself. In an open coding approach, as I read the transcribed text of an interview, I gave code names to main ideas that were revealed in a particular sentence or paragraph. After coding the entire interview in this manner, I further sought to classify, as per my research objectives, each code as a “joy,” a “challenge,” a “shadow,” or if they did not fit any of these categories, I placed it in a catch-all category of “other.” In the process of analysis of interviews, I realized, as can also be commonly observed, that when people are happy with their lives, they are hard pressed to precisely identify the inspirations or joys in their lives; it is easier, as was specifically mentioned by one interviewee, to name the challenges that one faces. Also, I realized that Aurovilians who had grown up in the community, and again this was specifically mentioned by Sarah, did not formulate a cognitive understanding of Auroville’s ideals in that they neither read the relevant texts of the Mother on their own, and nor were these texts explicitly introduced to them as educational material by adults. Just by growing up in a milieu where adults sought to embody the ideals, children in Auroville had, as

Sarah said, “imbibed” Auroville’s transpersonal vision and possibly had a more integral and embodied understanding than people who came to Auroville as adults. At any rate people’s description of their lives showed a radically different approach to what one would expect in a mainstream society—an approach that I identify and detail in Chapter 6 as being spiritual. Once I had identified that spirituality was a way of life for many people, I specifically asked my interviewees what spirituality meant to them.

As far as possible, to avoid a proliferation of code names, I sought to keep code names as generalized as possible so that they could be applied to all interviews across cases. 151 codes were thus generated, which were then further classified into four categories of “joy,” “shadow,” “challenge” and “other.” The Hyperresearch program was highly useful in grouping together significant commonalities in responses across the interviews and quantifying them. The use of a software program not only greatly helped in the collection and analysis of data, but also left a clear, objective trail for anyone who wished to cross-check the interpretation of data.

Reporting of Data

The codes and categories generated from the interviews were then compared with the data gathered and organized from the survey. Additionally, in analyzing the social psychology of Auroville, different perspectives on common, central issues were gathered and are reported in subsequent chapters here in the context of relevant literature.

Reliability and Validity

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) maintain that reliability and validity in qualitative data are tantamount to “pursuing the unreachable ideal” (p. 80); as with Zeno’s paradox, one can only approach the goal but never reach it. As mentioned earlier, reliability of the data was sought by reducing my own subjective bias in the selection of the interviewees for the main study. I hold that the results of the survey are fairly reliable because instead of choosing a representative sample, which of necessity would always be limited in its representation, I chose to conduct a community-wide survey. Doubtless, no method is infallible, and as noted earlier, due to the challenge of working with outdated data on residents, not all Aurovilians got a personal copy of the survey form. My sense is that very few local Tamil men responded to the survey, and there was no easy way of targeting this segment of Auroville society as a group to solicit their opinions. This situation is somewhat remedied by the inclusion of two local Tamil men as interviewees—one each in the pilot study and main study. All in all, the Aurovilians who were excluded in one way or the other from the survey were excluded purely on a random basis and not based on the predilection of the researcher. At least, this much can be vouched for: all Aurovilians had access to survey forms.

I also sought to validate data collection and analysis through triangulation. Triangulation of data collection was achieved by collecting data through various means—pilot study, survey, main interviews and focus group interviews—in four distinct phases. Triangulation of data analysis was sought first, by using the same

interviewees of the main study for a focus group interview, and second, by using different methods for coding survey responses and interviews. The focus group interview was also used as a means to triangulate data collected through the survey and by participant-observation.

Limitations

First of all, this study is limited by its scope in that it is specific to Auroville at a certain time. As such it represents a single, bounded case and, while it is hoped that this study will encourage other studies on sociological and transpersonal dimensions of intentional communities, my results cannot be generalized and applied to other intentional communities.

Secondly, the study is based on the assumption that the participants hold certain spiritual ideals in consonance with the transpersonal vision of Auroville. While this assumption is corroborated by the survey-responses, the study does not throw light on the social psychology of Aurovilians (if any) who are in Auroville for social or economic reasons, such as being married into the community or joining Auroville for purely material gains.

Thirdly, as with any form of qualitative inquiry, the research design and the nature of data collection become limiting factors. The study mainly relies on analyzing written data specifically generated by the participants for the purpose of the study. While written data, being objective, commands validity, it naturally precludes participants who are not comfortable with the medium of writing. While I sought to secure the points of view of such people verbally and through

participant-observation, time was a limiting factor in collecting data through these means.

The written medium, however, by allowing for anonymity, encourages veracity. In a face-to-face encounter, potential prejudices of the participants as well as assumptions about what the researcher wants to hear, could well have influenced their responses. The human biases of understanding and interpretation are also limiting and error-prone factors especially given the multi-lingual and multi-cultural milieu of Auroville. All these limitations were sought to be minimized by cross-checking data gathered through verbal means at the focus group interview. In reporting the data I also indicate the race and gender of each informant to alert the reader about possible different interpretations that can arise because of these social categories.

Lastly, while I use accepted methods in social science research in my study, I subscribe to a transpersonal view of human nature, and that of necessity implies that there are transpersonal ways of knowing that will remain outside the scientific purview. This study throws a certain light on the social psychology of Auroville, but given the immense goal and the diversity of Aurovilians, it is a limited light. As a pioneering research project into a spiritual society, this study is limited by its methodology in that it could not fully plummet into the depths of the Spirit and its action as experienced by individuals. There is a need to come up with innovative transpersonal, participatory and phenomenological methodologies not only to determine, but also perhaps to, qualitatively gauge psychospiritual traits in spiritual communities and societies.

CHAPTER 4: AUROVILLE: AN UTOPIAN DREAM?

To many seeking an alternative lifestyle, Auroville is looked upon as the largest and one of the most successful intentional communities ever continuing grow and thrive since the 1960s, long after other similar projects of that era have been disbanded (Butler, 2002; Pillai, 2005). Paradoxically, Aurovilians never refer to Auroville as such. This point was brought home to me during a casual lunch conversation at the Solar Kitchen one day when an Aurovilian somewhat vehemently proclaimed: “Auroville is not a community, it is a settlement by individuals” (personal communication, May 4, 2007). Elaborating on this issue, A, a young man from U.K. who has been in Auroville for over a decade, reminisces:

When I first came to Auroville, I was looking for an intentional community—to share my daily life with a group of people. In my years here, I lived in two intentional communities [within Auroville], Verité and Adventure . . . I went through my intentional community phase, but now I firmly believe that intentional community works against the principles of Auroville. The energy of an intentional community is not conducive to the Auroville spirit—to individualism within the bigger collective.

Yet despite Aurovilians’ protests to the contrary, by its very ideal of spiritualized collective living, Auroville belongs to a special but varied class of human settlements that have deliberately distanced themselves from the values of mainstream society and are referred to as utopias, communes, or generically as intentional communities—the last being a neutral, inclusive, and commonly preferred term for all experiments in shared living (Shenker, 1986; *Intentional Communities*, n.d.).^{xxvi} While mainstream societies are large and unstructured in their organization and defined by macro socio-economic forces, intentional

communities are limited in size and deliberately organized around certain guiding motives or intentions. Their intrinsic intentionality, which includes the endeavor to embrace a different approach to life, allows for the development of community, that is, a richer communal experience than is possible, say, in a neighborhood in normal society.

History and Definition of Intentional Communities

Historically, early human societies were tribal or communal by nature (S. L. Brown, 2002b). The joint family system, which still persists in India today, can be considered to be a form of community as it shares labor, food and wealth among extended family members (Mohanty, 2003b). The difference between these older societies and modern intentional communities is that the latter are fashioned by intention and formed out of the individual volition of its constituent members. As S. L. Brown notes, while in the past, societies comprised communities; today intentional communities are subsets of larger societies and nation-states.

Humanity's drive towards intentional societies first finds expression in monastic living in Eastern religious traditions as well as in early and medieval Christianity, many forms of which still continue today. The conceptualization of secular communal living in the Western tradition dates back to Plato's 3rd century BCE work *The Republic* (2000), continues in the late middle ages with Thomas More's novel *Utopia* (1516/1994), and finds modern expression in the socialist thought of Engels (1900). By punning on the Greek works *eutopia* (good place) and *outopia* (no place), More's novel gave birth to the word *utopia*, which

describes an unattainable but idealized society (Mumford, 1922). Armytage's (1961) work, which lists the history of the communal movement in England from the time of the publication of More's *Utopia* to the middle of the 20th century, stands testimony to the enduring human effort towards seeking to manifest communal ideals. In USA, intentional communities predate the formation of the political nation (Oved, 1993; Zablocki, 1980), and Zablocki identifies five distinct periods of active community building in the United States starting with the colonial era in the 17th century. In contemporary history, the 1960s and 1970s saw an efflorescence of intentional communities both in USA and Europe, many of which allowed for alternative forms of spirituality (Abrams & McCullough, 1976; Zablocki, 1980; Butler, 2002). Auroville's inception in 1968 can be seen as being part of this wider social movement in the world. Despite its location in India, Auroville drew members from Europe and USA from the outset.

The most comprehensive listing of intentional communities is the *Communities Directory: A Comprehensive Guide to Intentional Communities and Cooperative Living* (2007) maintained by the Fellowship for Intentional Community (FIC), which lists over a thousand communities worldwide. Given this wide and varied range, it is impossible to describe intentional communities except in the broadest terms, such as FIC's board member and coordinator Kozeny's (1996) definition of an intentional community as "a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values" (para. 3). Drawing from the documented literature of FIC, Kopaczewski (1998) distinguishes intentional

communities from mainstream society by pointing out that the former share certain core values, such as spirituality, ecology, and consensus decision-making, and are not fixated on mainstream social values such as money, position and status. S. L. Brown's (2002b) definition of intentional communities as being "bent on solving a specific set of cultural and social problems" (p. 5) is, to my mind, arguable. While intentional communities undoubtedly develop socio-economic and cultural forms different from those of mainstream society, it is highly questionable that all intentional communities see their primary goal as solving problems of the larger society. Shenker's criteria come perhaps closer to the mark in defining most intentional communities as more or less meeting the following conditions:

1. It was founded as a conscious and purposive act;
2. Membership is voluntary and based on a conscious act (even if the member was born in the community);
3. The group sees itself as separate from and different to its environment and relates as a group to (or withdraws as a group from) its environment;
4. The community is relatively self-contained—most members can potentially live their entire lives in it (or for the period during which they are members);
5. Sharing is part of the community's ideology;
6. The community has collective goals and needs and expects members to work towards their satisfaction;
7. The ideology claims that the goals of the community, even if orientated to the benefit of the individual, can only be obtained in a collective framework;
8. Ultimately the community, or people appointed by the community, but not the individual, is the source of authority;
9. The general way of life of the community is considered to be inherently good, i.e. is an end in itself over and above its instrumental value;
10. The community's existence has a moral value and purpose which transcend the time-span of individual membership. (1986, pp. 10-11)

Auroville as an Intentional Community

Auroville is listed in FIC's *Communities Directory* (2007) and subscribes to the general criteria and values of an intentional community listed above. None of the numerous promotional and public relations materials generated by Aurovilian working groups, however, refer to Auroville as a commune or an intentional community preferring to follow the Mother in calling it a town or a city. By the same token, the Global Ecovillage Network (2007) lists Auroville as an ecovillage, though Aurovilians do not describe it as such. An ecovillage is an environmentally-oriented intentional community. Their introductory article titled *What is an Ecovillage?* describes ecovillages as "urban or rural communities of people, who strive to integrate a supportive social environment with a low-impact way of life" (para. 1). While Auroville lists its environmental achievements in many of its publications, only a small faction of Aurovilians subscribe to the core values of ecovillages; there are no institutionalized benefits to promote environmental sustainability in Auroville.

In my view, Auroville's stated mission to be a town of 50,000, as defined by its Master Plan (Auroville Foundation, 2001), sharply differentiates it from other experiments in communal living. Abrams and McCullough (1976) report that communes in UK comprise just 5-25 adults. Even in its present manifestation, Auroville's population of 1,908 as of August 2007 (Auroville Universal Township, 2007), is bigger than that of The Farm, the biggest intentional community in the USA (The Farm, n.d.) and bigger than Damanhur, arguably Europe's largest ecovillage and mystical society, comprising 750 members.

Moreover, Auroville's population is extremely diverse, encompassing people from 40 countries with varying literacy levels and coming from different cultures and economic classes and not all Aurovilians know one another. The diversity of Auroville's population and the spread of its settlements over a rural area of 20 square kilometers preclude it from having intensive group bonding and sharing processes that, as Kopaczewski (1998) states, are generally deemed necessary to build community.

What is also unusual is that Auroville's claim to be a city is supported by the Government of India and has been endorsed by the internationally recognized secular body of United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Given its special status, Auroville enjoys an international reputation and receives high profile visitors, including heads of state, an honor perhaps never accorded to any other intentional community.^{xxvii} Since its inception to the present day, it has received financial and organizational support from the Government of India on an unprecedented scale for an intentional community. Organizationally, given the fact that currently all immovable assets of Auroville are legally held in trust by the Indian government and that the Indian government wields absolute power in determining the visas and residential permits of foreign Aurovilians, Auroville's classification as a self-determining, intentional community seems dubious. Since 2006, for instance, the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, a nominated representative of the Indian government, has started wielding his/her authority on foreign nationals wishing to join Auroville by determining whether they are granted an entry visa or not, irrespective of Auroville's Entry Group

recommendations. In 2007, when the Working Committee, the primary governing body for internal affairs of Auroville, sought to solicit opinions in the community about the Indian government's role in managing Auroville's finances, a few foreign Aurovilians mentioned that they were afraid to freely cast their vote lest their actions result in the cancellation of their residential permits.

Other researchers have similarly noted major differences between Auroville and other intentional communities. Butler (2002), commenting on Miller's (n.d.) criteria for hippy communes, notes that, unlike the hippy communal movement, Auroville has always had a controlled entry policy and an official ban on the use of drugs. Also, contrary to the hippies' open disdain for established culture, Auroville, at least officially, has worked hard to gain acceptance in established Indian culture, both at a local and national level. For Pillai (2005), the internationally diverse profile of Auroville's population and its very location in impoverished rural India on a once-environmentally degraded area is highly unusual. She points out that Auroville, in sharp contrast to other intentional communities, is forced to maintain a continual relationship with the native population, who are vastly different from the Aurovilians in terms of culture and class. Butler, noting Auroville's spiritual aspiration to accelerate the process of human evolution and the immense span of time of a few centuries afforded for its achievement,^{xxviii} finds Auroville to be uniquely ambitious for an intentional community, although he invites comparison of Auroville with religious utopias.

Auroville: A Religious Utopia?

What differentiates religious utopias from other forms of communal living is the fact that the former view “community as a tool to further their spiritual agenda, rather than as an end in itself” (Religious Spiritual Communities, n.d., para 1). Religion (along with politico-economic or psychosocial needs) is one of the main motivations for individuals to break away from mainstream society to form intentional communities (Kanter, 1972). Religious communities are, almost without exception, started by authoritative, charismatic leaders and formed around ideological religious beliefs including the members’ prevalent conviction in the divinity of the founder (Kamau, 2002). The cohesiveness of the community is in some part due to this shared set of beliefs (Siegler, 2002).

It is inconceivable to imagine the inception and continued progress of Auroville without the charismatic presence of its founder, the Mother. Till her demise in 1973, from among scores of applicants who were inspired by the ideals of Auroville, the Mother personally selected, on the basis of a picture or a personal interview, those whom she deemed spiritually fit for the experiment of Auroville. For most Aurovilians, especially those who had met her personally or even just had *darshan*, the Mother was a powerful, spiritual figure. *Darshan* (Sanskrit for *vision*) is a well-documented ritual in Hindu spiritual traditions where the *guru* imparts spiritual power to his/her disciples simply by looking at them in silence. On special days during the year Sri Aurobindo and the Mother would give *darshan* to their disciples. Later the Mother took on the practice of *balcony darshan* where she would come out to a terrace near her room to silently

gaze at the crowds gathered on the street below. The event was regarded as being profoundly transformative, as is best documented in the personal accounts of Aurovilians in the book *Darshan* (2006). For many among this generation of older Aurovilians, it is this singular event that has marked their decision to be in Auroville. When asked what keeps him in Auroville, an American who has been here for over thirty years stated simply, “I promised this old lady that I would build her city” (personal communication, July 18, 2007). This charisma as well as her association with Sri Aurobindo, a respected national figure in India, also drew a number of important political leaders—notably the late Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi—to Pondicherry to seek the Mother’s advice and blessings. Auroville’s continued support by the Indian government is in no small measure due to the reverence that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother command in India.

While Sri Aurobindo and the Mother did not emphasize their own divinity, they clearly regarded themselves as evolutionary pathfinders who played a crucial role in bringing down the Divine supramental consciousness to Earth. Pillai (2005) notes that there exist a number of often contesting opinions among Aurovilians about the Mother’s supposed divinity ranging from those who regard her as an inspired or enlightened human being to those who see her as an *avatār* (a Divine status beyond the reach of ordinary human beings) to still others who dismiss, though never publicly, the Mother’s authority and words. However, there is a general acceptance of the Mother’s vision of Auroville in that Sri Aurobindo’s and her words are held largely sacrosanct and rarely contested in public. It is this official depiction of Auroville that gives a sense of social

coherence to this loosely organized community. People's deep and varied connection to the Mother that surfaced in my data is analyzed in Chapter dealing with Auroville as a spiritual society. Here, as testimony to the Mother's charismatic spiritual authority, I quote only one survey respondent where the Mother's word was for her a sufficient reason for her to be in Auroville: "Auroville was founded by the Mother and she had told us (the whole family of six members, currently only three are there) to be here. She knew what is best and I trust Her fully" (Appendix E).

Even though the Mother never lived in Auroville, residing instead a few kilometers away at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, she took a personal interest in guiding Auroville and regularly advised Aurovilians on practical matters and/or ideological issues from 1968-1973. Unlike religious communes where the word of the leader is followed without question, in Auroville, the Mother never sought to impose her will on the Aurovilians. For instance, the Mother once noted that Aurovilians had all fallen into bad habits that harm the consciousness, such as smoking, drinking, and taking drugs, but rather than forbidding them to do, she expressed her preference to let the Aurovilians learn from their own experience (The Mother on Auroville—Year 1970). Given the dispersed nature of early Auroville settlements and the lack of adequate communication structures and enforcing agencies, it is debatable how much influence and authority the Mother actually had on Aurovilians. In another instance the Mother specifically mentions losing her influence and authority over the then Aurovilians, for they had stopped listening to her (The Mother on

Auroville—Year 1971).^{xxix} Some people even stayed on at Auroville without the permission of the Mother.

Also, unlike other religious communes where there is a clear devolution of authority, the Mother passed away within six years of founding Auroville without naming a successor—perhaps in consonance with the teaching of Integral Yoga that the next evolutionary step required individuals to act from their own inner spiritual wisdom. By analyzing demographical data, I estimate 1,300 Aurovilians never saw or met the Mother, and their views of her differ significantly from those who did. Given all these challenging and unusual factors it is actually amazing, as Leard (1993) and Pillai (2005) note, that Auroville has not only persevered but has thrived for over four decades without centralized leadership.

Akin to the multivalent significance that the Mother has for Aurovilians, there exist a similar range of interpretations of Auroville's spiritual ideals. Auroville's founding philosophy of human unity and world transformation is derived from the spiritual vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. But this vision is so futuristic and ambitious that the ideal Auroville is a utopia—something that can only be imagined but not easily attained.

The plurality of interpretations of Auroville's spiritual ideals to a certain degree stem from the Mother's own seemingly contradictory statements about Auroville. On numerous occasions the Mother refers to Auroville as an experiment, but at other instances she describes Auroville in transcendental terms stating that the founding of the city was undertaken by a Divine decree and that it already exists on an occult plane waiting to be manifested. Accordingly, while

some Aurovilians subscribe to the experimental nature of Auroville and recognize that, as cited by a survey-respondent, Auroville may soon become “just another town in India,” others, especially a group that term themselves *Dreamcatchers*, have the firm conviction that they need to be spiritually open to channeling and manifesting this city—which already exists on a subtle level—on earth. This dialectic between viewing the transpersonal vision of Auroville as expressed by the Mother as an unchanging, eternal truth, and viewing it as an experimental ideal that embraces all of life and evolves as it manifests, seems to be central to a certain underlying interpersonal tension among Aurovilians. This was clearly highlighted to me once when I was working out at the Auroville gym, and from the dance studio upstairs, the fast, rhythmic beats of salsa music and dance came floating down. A friend and fellow Aurovillian present at the gym came up to me and privately expressed his displeasure at something as sensual as salsa dancing being offered in Auroville. While I gently joked with him, reminding him of Sri Aurobindo’s often-quoted dictum that “all life is yoga” (Ghose, 1990, p. 7), I was struck by his belief that something as innocuous as dancing should not have a place in Auroville.

Even though it is a routine question asked of Newcomers seeking to join Auroville, it is debatable how many Aurovilians have actually read Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and are aware, in any depth, of Auroville’s ideals. One of the major handicaps in this context is the level of literacy, particularly in English—the language that Sri Aurobindo wrote in and the Mother’s works are translated into. While exact demographic data are lacking, there are at least 600 Aurovilians

who are illiterate or semi-literate in English. While some knowledge of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo is considered to be desirable to join the Auroville experiment, as per Entry Services policies, it is not mandatory. About 200 or so women from neighboring villages also joined the community not for its ideals but by virtue of having their marriages arranged to Tamil Aurovilians. Auroville does not have any formal processes by which Newcomers seeking to become Aurovilians can become aware of Auroville's ideals. Also, regular classes offered in Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's thought are in English and not Tamil. E, one of my interviewees, who came to Auroville as an adolescent and studied at a Tamil high school here, mentioned that she knew very little about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother; it was not part of her schooling. Aware that this is a problem faced by other Tamil women, E has subsequently taken the initiative to invite Tamil speakers to talk about Integral Yoga and other allied subjects at the women's group meetings that she organizes. In another interview, A noted that while, as per Auroville's Charter, people joining Auroville should not be required to subscribe to Integral Yoga, he felt that for his own personal integrity he could not have lived in Auroville without having a connection to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Ultimately it is left to the individual to determine the depth to which one wants to understand and participate in the ideals of Auroville, all of which neatly dovetail into one another to form an integral, spiritual and evolutionary way of life.

Given the wide range of reasons why people come to join Auroville—through marriage, for material gains, by happenstance, and so forth—Auroville, as Pillai (2005) also observes, does not have a set of easily identifiable common

goals that all Aurovilians subscribe to, nor do people's participation in Auroville follow a single, distinct trajectory. And unlike many religious communities (e.g., see Kanter, 1972; Saliba, 2003), this variety of ways of being and living are accepted, though admittedly grudgingly by some Aurovilians, given the goal of Integral Yoga. For instance, emphasizing the validity of embracing a multiplicity of practices, one woman refused to fill out my survey explaining that there would be no common responses, for "each individual, depending on his or her development, would face challenges that were needed at that moment for his/her inner progress" (personal communication, June 18, 2007). This statement also echoes Auroville's ideal of wanting to be a universal town for people of all countries to live in "progressive harmony" (Author, 1980, p. 193). A progressive harmony implies that the human unity being sought in Auroville is not a static harmony imposed by outer means on the individuals, but a harmony that is somehow worked out dynamically through the unfolding of life by taking into account the growth of each individual.

Even though the Mother prescribed a spiritual vision of Auroville, she did not lay down a clearly defined and rigid blueprint for the organization and manifestation of the city stating, "things will get formulated as the underlying truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively" (Alfassa, 1980, p. 269). As a result, unlike religious utopias that have a more or less stable organizational structure and a common set of practices based on its values and intentions, Auroville's very structure is nebulous and mutable. As mentioned earlier, Integral Yoga, based on individual freewill and self-determination, allows

utmost freedom to individuals in their spiritual practice and way of life. And as for Auroville, the Mother believed that there would be a spontaneous, free-willed organization if all individuals became conscious of and obeyed the Divine guidance from within. Many Aurovilians reported to feeling guided by the Divine in following their way of life, and twenty-two people in my survey specifically stated that what they inspire about Auroville is the freedom granted by this place. The drawback to this freedom is that, in the absence of spiritual authority, there is often no common agreement among Aurovilians, and until very recently, when the community adopted a voting system, the decision-making process in Auroville's Residents' Assembly was hamstrung due to lack of consensus (Carel, 2007).

In the course of time, Aurovilians have developed certain collective socio-economic structures to help implement the Mother's vision, but these structures are frequently experimented with and changed by the community. Governance is carried out by working groups whose terms of office and membership are determined by the larger community. Given the lack of authoritarian structures to enforce decisions, governance is largely dependent on individual goodwill.

Yeomans (1996) categorizes religious/spiritual groups by defining the nature of the leader, the members, and their relationship. Thus for Yeomans, at the negative extreme are cults characterized by an authoritarian leader and regressed members while at the positive extreme are decentralized groups, which are creative micro-cultures characterized by members with equity of power, and leaders who lead only by natural power and are simultaneously fully contributing

members. While for the sake of better administration, the Government of India has imposed an organizational structure on Auroville, as explained earlier, practically speaking all power is democratically devolved to the Residents' Assembly. Many Aurovilians also decry the arbitrarily imposed structure of the Government and instead subscribe to the Mother's organizational ideal of a *Divine anarchy* for Auroville, where "the anarchic state is the self-government of each individual . . . when each one becomes conscious of the inner Divine and will obey only him and him [sic] alone" (Alfassa, 2000, p. 76). Thus both in its ideals and its current reality, as a spiritual collective, Auroville leans more towards being a creative micro-culture where individual will is not dominated by an authoritative leader or group. The lack of leaders is revealed by the fact that no clear leaders emerged in the survey: Asked to name three Aurovilians who they felt had significantly contributed to Auroville by their presence or through their work, Aurovilians nominated 159 people (some named more than three people stating that there were far more than three Aurovilians who qualified under this category).

In this respect Auroville differs sharply from religious utopias. To elaborate, Kanter's (1972) study sees a utopian community as a monolithic institute characterized by centralized coordination and intentional implementation of values that are in keeping with pre-determined ideals. In contrast, in Auroville, akin to Abrams and McCullough's description of British communes, "there is a groping, quality about social interaction . . . which suggests the encounter rather than the establishment, a continuous testing of the others indicating that the unity

of meaning within the group is uncertain, fluid and problematic” (1976, p. 36). Where Auroville differs from Abrams and McCullough’s secular communes is that while the latter primarily seek to institute friendship or develop community, in Auroville group bonding and the institution of friendship is a secondary and dispensable aim. In numerous messages—for example in a text called “To be a True Aurovilian” (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200)—the Mother mentions individual growth and realization as prerequisite for the spiritual aims of Auroville. A few Aurovilians prefer to minimize their social contact and lead a solitary life based around their individual practice. One interviewee mentioned how at the age of 60, he gave up his job and minimized his social contacts to lead a quiet life centered on his practice. Another survey respondent decried the current pressure to do “visible work for the community” protesting that that would make Auroville like any other city. While Integral Yoga perforce implies a collective yoga that recognizes one’s kinship with other human beings (Mohanty, 2004), it does not necessarily imply that Aurovilians have to do things together in their outer, daily life. As a matter of fact the Mother was against compulsory, organized meditations in Auroville explaining that while “one of the most common types of human collectivity [is] to group together . . . around a common ideal . . . a true community can be based only on the inner realization of each one of its members.” (Alfassa, 1979, p. 107). The importance that Aurovilians place on individual growth is best evidenced in the following statements from two survey respondents:

It is very inspiring. I have gotten a lot from it. I have been able to progress so much over the years. The atmosphere here is very conducive to inner change and helps you find yourself.

I love Auroville. It helps me in my inner growth and if I'm here it means that Auroville is my short-cut to myself. God knows if I'm here till the rest of my life but each of us is a piece of mosaic and plays one's unique role for Auroville's growth. Life is already a challenge especially if you know why you are here. (Appendix E)

The second response seems to hint that it is only through one's own individual growth that one helps the community, but at the same time recognizes that Auroville is not the only place where one can experience growth. Both respondents also allude to an invisible, transpersonal force that seems to work in Auroville facilitating one's growth—an issue that is discussed in Chapter 6 on Auroville's spirituality.

I would like to note here that of among the different types of intentional community, Auroville most closely resembles a large, modern kibbutz with a secular outlook. As with the kibbutz, while the beliefs and values held by Aurovilians are functionally equivalent to religious beliefs, it would be too simplistic to equate these beliefs with religion, especially given their variety. What Cohen (1982) writes about the modern kibbutz is largely true of Auroville as well: "There is nothing *explicitly* [emphasis added] 'sanctified' about any aspect of kibbutz life or of its institutional arrangements" (p. 124).^{xxx}

Distinguishing Between Religion and Spirituality

As of yet anthropologists and sociologists have not sought to differentiate religion from spirituality while studying religious communities. The differentiation is admittedly fairly recent and until about thirty years ago religion

and spirituality were regarded as synonyms in social and human sciences (Fuller, 2001; Zinnbauer, Pargament, Cole, Rye, Butter, & Belavich, 1997). However, in recent times, both in popular culture and in certain academic fields including that of psychology, the term spirituality is being increasingly used in ways that distinguish it from religion (A. King, 1996). The individualized and postmodern outlook of contemporary global culture with its attendant loss of the authority of institutions seems to be primarily the reason for this phenomenon (Marler & Hadaway, 2002; A. King, 1996; Schneiders, 2003). While currently there is no consensus on the meanings associated with the term, there is a growing common understanding, based on qualitative research findings, of associating spirituality with personal beliefs and experiences that may or may not be connected to an institution. Religion, according to the same study, refers primarily to institutionalized beliefs and practices but can include personal beliefs as well (Zinnbauer et al, 1997). This distinction seems to be borne out in some academic disciplines as well: Marler and Hadaway (2002) taking their cue from Pargament (1999a) state that “in traditional social science terminology, ‘spirituality’ appears to represent the functional and more intrinsic dimensions of religion, whereas ‘religion’ appears to be the more substantive, extrinsic ones” (p. 289). While all scholars agree that spirituality and religion are interrelated terms, there is widespread dissension about the exact relationship between the two (e.g., see Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Pargament, 1999b; and Stiffos-Hanssen, 1999). There is also a growing recognition that the meanings associated with these terms are culture-specific (e.g., see Pargament, 1999a; Stiffos-Hanssen, 2000). Finally,

it would seem that scholars choose to define the terms in ways that suit their specific interests. For example, Pargament (1999b) sees religion as the bigger context, which subsumes spirituality, given perhaps his preference not to have the academic discipline of the “psychology of religion” re-defined as the “psychology of religion and spirituality.” My purpose in engaging in this discussion of the distinction between spirituality and religion is two-fold: Firstly, I believe that we need to bring more nuanced perspectives to qualitative studies of spiritual communities and religious utopias; Secondly, I would like to present the emic reasons why Auroville prefers to be seen as a spiritual community and not a religious one. I do not suggest a definitive distinction between religion and spirituality but explore these constructs and differentiate between them in order to better understand and distinguish religious utopias from spiritual communities.

I take as my point of departure the fact that participants of the resurgent spirituality pervading contemporary North American culture themselves use the term spirituality in deliberate opposition to the term religion (Forman, 2004). The reason for this is historically—especially in the development of Abrahamic or Judeo-Christian religions—religions have been authoritative and exclusive institutions (Forman, 2004; Schneiders, 2003). There exists, in popular North American culture, negative associations with institutionalized religions, which is perhaps why many people seek to describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” (Fuller, 2001, p. 4). By describing themselves as spiritual, lay people seem to privilege a personalized and “felt-relationship with the deepest meanings

or powers governing life” (Fuller, 2001, p. 9), which may or may not be experienced in the context of an institution.^{xxxix}

In the cultural imagination of contemporary society then, religion is more narrowly defined than it is in the academic world. As a theoretical construct, religion is a multivalent concept: It is a discourse, practice, and formalized cultural system that can be analyzed without reference to the individuals who believe in it; it also refers to an individual’s beliefs, sentiments, practices and experiences (Berger, 1967). Culturally, in recent years, the meaning of the term has been largely “reduced to and equated with its institutionalization so that the failures of the latter seem to invalidate the former” (Schneiders, 2003, p. 181).

Sometimes an individual’s spiritual experience can contradict the beliefs and practices of the religious institution that he/she belongs to, and I suggest that religiosity of an institution is indicated by the degree to which the institution determines the beliefs and practices of the individual. I propose that the term spirituality and other cognate words be used to refer to subjective beliefs, practices and experiences that are freely adopted by an individual without any coercion from the institution. In other words, I believe that religion privileges and emphasizes the collective features of the institution while spirituality emphasizes the individual’s autonomy—even when he or she is part of a group.

One way of distinguishing spirituality from religion is perhaps to recognize that the former, unlike the latter, is “born out of a secular substratum” (M. King, 2004, p. 8) of modernity. Secularization is generally understood as a cultural shift where societies cease to be regulated by religious institutions and

their beliefs and practices (Sommerville, 1998), but it should be noted here that secularism does not imply a decline of belief, as is often commonly assumed. It merely shifts the devotion from a religiously ordained, transcendental concern to a worldly concern, such as that of capitalism, materialism, scientism or nationalism (Griffin, 1988). Spirituality can then be described as a subjective religious expression of those individuals who have undergone the differentiations of modernity and are thus capable of cultivating both faith and critical reason.

Etymology also suggests a distinction between religion and spirituality. The origin of the former word is believed to be the Latin verb *religare*, which means to bind or to restrain, while spirituality is derived from the Late Latin word *spiritus*, which simply means, “to breathe” (Merriam-Webster, 2003). Forman (2004) notes that in the Christian tradition, the spirit is seen as being in dialectical opposition to non-living matter.^{xxxiii} The distinction between religious communities and spiritual communities is extremely tenuous, and the Fellowship for Intentional Communities, the leading authority on intentional communities, does not seek to distinguish between the two forms recognizing that spiritual communities can be eclectic in their faith or based around a particular spiritual practice. Given the contemporary resurgence of spirituality, however, I find it fruitful to delineate the difference between religious and spiritual communities on the basis of individual volition. Spiritual individuals adopt a teacher, or join a community, or take up a practice out of their own free will in order to further their own development and not because they feel compelled, by virtue of being born into a particular religious community, to act in accordance with behavior expected

of them. In a religious community there is a greater subordination of the individual personality and will—an authoritative group or figure ordains the practices, and individuals are discouraged from questioning those practices. In other words, in a religious community reason is often undifferentiated from and suppressed by religious belief, while in a postsecular and spiritual community reason is either a handmaiden of spiritual faith or exists in dialectical tension with it. As in Habermas' (1979) view of modern culture, faith is not blindly adopted but is an object for the application of reason.

Symbols and rituals also take on different meanings in religious and spiritual communities. The meanings and status of symbols in religious communities are largely fixed. Over time, the meanings and interpretations may change even in the face of authoritative opposition, but such changes are slow, and religious authorities are generally reluctant to admit and incorporate new rituals and symbols. On the other hand, in spiritual communities it is left to the individual to interpret the meaning of symbols and selectively combine and personalize the enactment of rituals. Also, because the individual self is multidimensional and ever-changing, the process of interpreting symbols or choosing rituals is similarly open-ended and subject to change. Admittedly no matter how much one theoretically tries to tease out the differences between religion and spirituality, in practice the relationship between the individual and the collective is a complex and mutually influential one: As individuals discuss their beliefs and experiences with other like-minded individuals, these beliefs gain authenticity and become even more compelling than they might seem to others

outside of the community (Berger, 1967). As Wuthnow (1992) aptly states, “shared conviction strengthens the commitment of all by making subjective belief an intersubjective reality” (p. 48). And so, with the institutionalization of an intersubjective reality a spiritual community can easily turn into a religious one. The distinction between the two forms will always be nebulous, still I suggest that institutionalization of beliefs and individual autonomy be regarded as general markers to differentiate between the two.

These are, I admit, tentative suggestions for distinguishing between religious and spiritual communities. We may never reach consensus on the definition and relationship of these terms, and perhaps nor is it desirable that we do. My motive here is to merely caution sociologists and anthropologists from making simplistic generalizations about all religious communities being similar in their attitudes towards faith and reason. As Saliba (2003) notes, merely by viewing all current social expressions of spirituality as new religious movements and frequently equating them with cults, sociology has done a disservice both to academia and to the lay public. We need to bring nuanced perspectives, at once sympathetic and critical, that validate both first-person and third-person viewpoints in researching religious utopias and spiritual communities.

Both historically and ideologically, Auroville decidedly does not define itself as a religious community.^{xxxiii} Historically, with the passing away of the Mother in 1973, there was an internal conflict in Auroville: A group called the Sri Aurobindo Society, based in Pondicherry and appointed by the Mother to raise funds for Auroville, sought to gain control over it claiming that it was one of their

religious projects. This move was opposed by most Aurovilians who sought to adhere to the principle laid by the Mother that only those living in Auroville had the right to determine its development. After years of struggle the matter was taken to the Supreme Court of India, which, in 1982, gave the verdict that as Sri Aurobindo's teachings merely represented his philosophy, it did not constitute a religion and consequently, Auroville was a not religious institution (Carel, 2003). Since then, the Government of India has accorded a special status to Auroville, especially in the matter of visa regulations, that recognize it to be different from other religious organizations in India, such as an *āṣrām*. And since then, Aurovilians have zealously sought to defend themselves from being classified as a religious institution. For example, in the 1990s, Auroville International Germany, on the behalf of Auroville, successfully defended itself in a German court against a lawsuit that charged Auroville with being a cult (Carel, 2003).

Ideologically, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother resisted from terming their movement as a religion, claiming that their spiritual work would benefit all of humanity and not just one segment of it. While the Mother recognized that people including the inmates of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram were ready to form a religion out of Sri Aurobindo's teachings, she held that "religion and yoga [spiritual practice] are not situated on the same plane of being, and the spiritual life can exist in its purity only if it is free from all mental dogma" (1981, p. 191). For the Mother, individual autonomy served as a marker in the distinction between religion and spirituality:

We give the name religion to any concept of the world or the universe, which is presented as the exclusive Truth in which one must have an

absolute faith, generally because this Truth is declared to be the result of a revelation.

Most religions affirm the existence of a God and the rules to be followed to obey Him. . . . To seek Truth freely and to approach it freely along his own lines is a man's right [sic.]. But each one must know that his discovery is good for him alone and it is not to be imposed on others. (Alfassa, 1980, p. 213)

For both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, a claim for the exclusivity of one's truth was a sign of religious fundamentalism.^{xxxiv} Sri Aurobindo (1970) says that a spiritual society becomes a sect if it is marked by egoism and holds itself as being superior to others outside the society.

For Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, religion was associated with the planes of mind, life and body, while spirituality related to the transpersonal dimension of human existence. Says Sri Aurobindo, "spirituality is in its essence an awakening to the inner reality of our being, to a spirit, self, soul which is other than our mind, life and body" (Ghose, 1972a, p. 856). Describing faith as the knowledge of the soul, the Mother advocates it as a spiritual attitude and carefully distinguishes it from religious faith that is predicated on mental knowledge and beliefs:

We have faith in Sri Aurobindo. He represents for us something we formulate to ourselves with words, which seem to us the most exact for expressing our experience. These words are evidently the best according to us for formulating our experience. But if, in our enthusiasm, we were convinced that they are the only appropriate words to express correctly what Sri Aurobindo is and the experience he has given us, we would become dogmatic and be on the point of founding a religion. He [sic], who has a spiritual experience and a faith, formulates it in the most appropriate words for himself.

But if he is convinced that this expression is the only correct and true one for this experience and faith, he becomes dogmatic and tends to create a religion. (The Mother on Auroville—Year 1970, p. 61).

Thus subjective experiences and lack of exclusivity in formulating the experience are the two salient characteristics that distinguish a spiritual attitude from a religious one.

In analyzing the relationship between the individual and the community and the freedom accorded to members within communities, many writers infer that religious utopias either attract as members those individuals whose secular identity has collapsed, or they seek to re-mould the individual self by first destroying the capacity for reason and the secular personality (Saliba, 2003; Richardson, Simmons, & Harder, 1972). Religious communes often require the subordination of the individual identity to the group identity (e.g., see Kamau, 2002 on the Harmony society; Foster, 2002 on the Oneida community; and Siegler, 2002 on the community called In Search of Truth). As opposed to this, community in Auroville is predicated on the belief that the sense of community can only be based on an individual's free-willed participation in it.

Religious Utopia or Spiritual Society?

In many ways, the very ideals of Auroville and the goals of integral yoga towards a planetary consciousness and actual human unity preclude Auroville from being too narrowly defined as a community with specific intentions that attracts only a certain type of like-minded people. Sri Aurobindo welcomed people from all backgrounds and walks of life to his path stating, "for a spiritual and supramental yoga, humanity should be variously represented" (Ghose, 1990, p. 856). Also, Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971) points out that a mere intellectual belief in human unity is doomed to failure, for actual unity can only be achieved

by the realization of the oneness of the whole universe. This spiritual ideal of human unity does not mean a homogenization or outward uniformity but rather is a differentiated oneness that celebrates the essential diversity of all creation. To that end, 15 Aurovilians showed awareness of this ideal in the survey with one of them expressly stating: “The possibilities in the diversity from which one can find her own unique way to grow and contribute to the whole” (Appendix E).

Specifically writing about Auroville’s spiritual ideals, the Mother declares, “Our research will not be a search effected by mystic means. It is in life itself that we wish to find the Divine. And it is through this discovery that life can really be transformed (Alfassa, 1980, p. 212).” Such ideals recast our understanding of Auroville not as a religious utopia, not even as a spiritual community focused on just its own practices and aims, but as an open-ended evolutionary experiment on human nature in the context of ordinary life that allows “free room for the realization of the highest human dreams, for the perfectibility of the race [meaning human species], a perfect society” (Ghose, 1971, p. 585). Like the statement of Auroville’s Charter, “Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 199), Sri Aurobindo’s words oblige us to think of Auroville as a planetary society and not just as a community within the nation-state of India.

S. L. Brown (2002a; 2002b) invites us to analyze intentional communities as smaller, observable units of nation-states. Nation-states are regarded by historians as cultural artifacts created by distinct socio-economic processes (Anderson, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1990). Anderson defines them as *imagined communities*, because even though the members of the smallest nation-state will

never know all of their fellow-members, each carries a personalized image of their communion. More recently, Raskin, Banuri, Gallopín, Gutman, Hammond, and Kates of the Global Scenario Group (2002) has put forward the concept of a planetary society in the context of a globalized world, where information technologies, environmental changes, economic globalization and shifts in cultural paradigms require us to think beyond the restricting strictures of nation-states to act as global citizens. Auroville can be examined as a sub-unit of a nation-state to the extent that its economy is defined by the socio-economic processes of India. But, given the fact that Auroville has its own internal economy and two-thirds of its population are foreign nationals participating, to some extent, in the economic flows of their home countries, it would be misleading to study Auroville just as a sub-unit of a nation-state. However, given its targeted population of 50,000 or even at its current size of 1,908 (Auroville Universal Township, 2007), Auroville can be defined as an imagined community in that it is far too big for everyone to get to know one another and yet each has a mental concept of what it means to be an Aurovilian. Thus in its ideals and in its current manifestation, Auroville shows characteristics of both a planetary society and an imagined community within a nation-state.

Though aware of the socio-cultural contradictions inherent in the concept of the nation-state, Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971) nevertheless recognizes the nation as the largest natural unit for collective living created and maintained by human beings. However, enjoining us to have a psycho-spiritual perspective on the evolution of nations, Sri Aurobindo conceives of a nation-soul where the

nation is defined not by the objective criteria of its economy or political boundaries but seeks to live out a subjective psychological and spiritual truth. Also, acknowledging the evolutionary drive in Nature towards unity, Sri Aurobindo foresees the formation of a world-state—a free grouping of all nations. To give a material form to these ideals, the Mother conceived of an international zone in Auroville where all nations and distinct cultures were to be invited to erect a *pavilion* that represents their soul.^{xxxv}

More importantly, perhaps in keeping with Integral Yoga’s goal of manifesting a spiritual life on earth, the Mother, envisioning Auroville to be crucial to the development of both India and the world, decisively stated: “India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that the . . . cure will be found. And then, that is why—that is why I was made to start Auroville” (1995, p. 41). Such statements simultaneously place Auroville in the context of India and point to its existence beyond this nation-state. Also, by virtue of its rural location, Auroville has a rich and complex relationship with its host country—the most significant markers of this relationship being the local village population, who have served and continue to serve as the labor pool for the physical development of this futuristic city, and the conferring of a unique status on Auroville by the Government of India as well as their channeling substantial funds to it.

Living in Auroville means having to negotiate with the socio-cultural milieu of both urban and rural India on a daily basis. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, the Mother’s prophetic statement does not seem to feature in the psychological

worldview of most Aurovilians. Only a few Aurovilians, such as Meenakshi and Bhavana who are engaged in rural development in the neighboring villages, see the local population as an inherent part of this experiment in human unity. One respondent to this study, an Indian Aurovillian who resonated with the Mother's ideal, explicitly stated, "In Auroville, I have gradually grown aware of a work, a vision, of what I could do for India and the world" (Appendix E). And about a decade ago, a French Aurovillian, seeing Auroville's wider purpose for humanity, publicly voiced the idea of Auroville being eventually granted an autonomous status, but this view was not taken kindly by the Indian government. All in all, Auroville's ideals, though not fully embodied by its members, unquestionably point towards the emergence of a planetary consciousness.

At the macro level, most intentional communities and religious utopias seek to have distinct borders and a separate identity that distinguishes them from the rest of society in a nation-state. While Auroville is a distinctive social and geographical entity, it is not invested in insulating itself from the wider society to protect its members from external influences. For in its spiritual ideology, as noted earlier, it aims at being open to all of life in order to transform it.

Auroville's physical borders are permeable with the boundaries of Auroville land being indistinguishable from those of village land. Nor do Aurovilians have platforms that are reserved exclusively for communication within the community. Meetings of the Residents' Assembly, the weekly Auroville publication, *News and Notes*, and the internal electronic forum, *AV Net* is also accessed by some who do not belong to the community. As for identity, the term Aurovillian, rather

than having objectively verifiable associations, has psychological and ideological significance—being an Aurovilian does not just mean being a resident of a geographically located community, it also means subscribing to a certain evolutionary worldview. One of my interviewees, Kalai, a Tamil woman, raised in Auroville, denounced some Aurovilians (who were more recent additions to the community) for their selfish attitude decrying that “they are not really Aurovilians!” Unlike the religious groups studied by Van Wormer (2004), in Auroville, there are absolutely no mandatory or recommended dress codes, and it would be impossible to distinguish Aurovilians from other people. Some Western Aurovilians periodically go back to spend extended time in their home countries to avail themselves of better educational and/or economic opportunities there. Others are engaged in commendable environmental and social development work in India. Visitors staying in Auroville, apart from being barred from certain key processes such as decision-making, are free to participate in Auroville’s life and, as mentioned by a couple of survey respondents, they are looked upon as part of the Auroville experiment and their fresh energy welcomed. And, as it is impossible to know everyone in a community of almost 2,000 people, sometimes Aurovilians are mistaken for guests by other Aurovilians. This is particularly true for the local segment of the Auroville community as some Tamil Aurovilian women, expressing their indignation at being constantly perceived as visitors by Western Aurovilians, pointed out to me. Unlike other Aurovilians, who are geographically separated from their natal families by thousands of miles, local

Aurovilians, especially the women, seem to live in two societies at once—that of Auroville and that of the culturally communal village life.

The Mother, by her insistence on “a life Divine but no religions” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 212), clearly envisioned Auroville not as a separate, select commune but as a city that was actively engaged in all aspects of life. Given these ideals, the cultural and socio-economic diversity of Aurovilians, the diffused boundaries, and the lack of an absolute and centralized authority that dictates patterns of behavior, Auroville is not a religious utopia but a spiritual experiment with social life. As a postsecular spiritual society, its socio-psychological traits differ considerably from those of religious utopias. Elaborating on M. King’s (2004) definition of a postsecular society as a society that consciously embraces spirituality having gone through the differentiation of religion and politics, I maintain that the psychological cartography of spiritual values, being centered on the individual, is significantly different in such a society to a premodern or religious one where group identity is privileged over individual identity. Furthermore, as demonstrated in social and cultural anthropology (Bhabha, 1994; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2000), the prefix “post” does not immediately denote a point beyond. Societies and cultures never decisively break with the past or leap to the future but continually strive to grow in a dynamic process of engagement and interchange between different states. In other words, I am by no means suggesting that premodern beliefs and values are not to be found in Auroville. On the contrary, religion continues to play a significant role for certain Aurovilians, specifically women who hail from the local villages. Once, when I arrived at a meeting of a

Tamil women's group, I was told that attendance was poor because most of the women, all Aurovilians, had gone to attend a religious festival that was being celebrated in the local villages. Pillai (2005), exploring Aurovilians' attitudes to the Mother's pictures, also notes religious behavior among some Western Aurovilians.

But one needs to exercise caution in assuming religious practices are derived from beliefs.^{xxxvi} An urban Tamil Aurovilian woman deriding the local Tamil Aurovilian women opined that they kept up their indigenous cultural practices, such as temple worship, not so much out of religious belief but to maintain social ties with their families living in the villages with the hope of deriving economic benefits in the form of inheritance and such. While it would be hard to substantiate this opinion without further research into this issue, one can nevertheless conclude that depending on an individual's development or even outlook at any given time, religious, secular, and postsecular values jostle with each other in the amorphous space of Auroville as strategies for individual and communal selfhood evolve.

It is not easy then to definitively classify Auroville either as an intentional community or a spiritual society. It has features of both, and as I detail in subsequent chapters, certain unique characteristics of Auroville's organizational ideals, as lived out by the Aurovilians, force us to rethink certain theoretical constructs about intentional communities prevalent in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Underlying these organizational ideals, or even forming the lynchpin of Auroville's social organization, is this radical

insight of Sri Aurobindo's that further evolution of the human species rests on the spiritual development of the individual, and hence the individual must never be made subservient to the society, but enjoy a free-willed and mutually affirming relationship with it.

CHAPTER 5: SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF AUROVILLE: THE DIALECTIC OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Broadly speaking, social psychology studies how social conditions affect human beings. As Maslow (1965), Wilber (1984) and Wexler (2000) have argued, the psychology of a group or society is directly dependent on its social structure or organization. As an academic discipline, social psychology explores social behavior in all its forms including how individuals interact with others in a group (Côté & Levine, 2002). It differs from the related disciplines of sociology, anthropology and psychology in that it seeks to examine the intersection of sociological and psychological phenomena (R. W. Brown, 1965). Traditionally, social psychology—like other social sciences—has been strongly influenced by ideas of objectivity and secularization, and consequently it largely views the human being as a rational individual acting in an objective world. Given Allport's (1924) historic pronouncement of “psychology in all its branches” as “a science of the individual” (p. 4), the notion of intersubjectivity, as Howarth (2001) points out, was banished from the discipline of social psychology to that of sociology. Thus contemporary social psychology, particularly in USA, focuses on the individual's adaptation to the society, which is largely measured by psychometric standards given the continued emphasis on objectivity in mainstream psychology (Maracek, Fine, & Kidder, 2001). A smaller but significant number of social psychologists who hail from the discipline of sociology examine individual behavior within the context of larger social structures and processes, such as social roles, race and class, and socialization (e.g., see Sewell, 1989). A still

smaller number of European social psychologists, such as Howarth (2001) and Tajfel (1974), have started researching intergroup relations.

Given its focus on mainstream society, case studies of intentional communities are as yet not included in the field of social psychology. Howarth (2001) proposes that social psychology should reclaim as its territory the intersections of the subjective “I” of the individual and the intersubjective “we” of society, by focusing on the notion of community as the locus for these interactions. Howarth, however, refers solely to racial communities that exist within mainstream society, and consequently, like other social psychologists, she views the individual as being socially conditioned and communities as being “socially constructed” by macroeconomic forces (p. 235). She, too, overlooks communities that have been intentionally formed by individuals, and even more importantly the power of human intentions in shaping society.^{xxxvii} In contrast to mainstream society, the goals and aims of an intentional community, such as the transpersonal ideals of Auroville, are explicitly stated. They are thus powerful “guiding images” (Markley, 1976, p. 214) and “object[s] of sociality” (Bauwens, 2007, p. 41) that foment subjective human intents into action both at an individual and at a collective level. I thus hope to pique interest among social psychologists by this pioneering case study on the spiritual ideals and social psychology of the intentionally formed community of Auroville. In my study I focus on the individual’s relationship to society, as Howarth does, but I hold a transpersonal view of human nature and do not view the human being merely as a rational creature determined by social structures and processes.

In addition to employing perspectives from social psychology in my study, in my double-pronged approach of viewing Auroville both as an experimental form of society and an intentional community I review literature on communal studies that emphasize internal relationships and certain sociological aspects within communities. I apply prevalent theoretical concepts in the literature to the data garnered in my qualitative study. By doing so, I show the inadequacy of some of these concepts in understanding the social psychology of Auroville. Finally, studies on intentional communities tend to focus on the group as a whole, but in a significant departure from this trend, by conducting a community-wide survey and by honoring Auroville's emic emphasis on individuality, I focus on individual members of the community.

Sociological and Anthropological Analyses of Intentional Communities

The bulk of literature on intentional communities, especially before the 80s, focuses on documenting the history of specific communities (Pitzer, 1997). Rather than being comparative or theoretical, these studies focus on the inception and/or demise of particular communities (Andelson, 2002). Notable exceptions to this early literature, and particularly pertinent for my research, are Kanter's (1972) highly influential work, *Commitment and community: Communes and utopias in sociological perspective*, which qualitatively analyzes the life-cycles of a sample of thirty utopian communities in USA using the theoretical concept of commitment, and Abrams and McCullough's (1976) sociological and qualitative study of British communes. I review these works below in the context of my own study.

In the past two decades there have been more analytic studies of intentional communities documenting their importance and implications for the wider society from anthropological perspectives (S. L. Brown, 2002b), social perspectives (Pitzer, 1984), general motivations for breaking away from the larger society to start communities (Barkun, 1984; Chamberlain, 1980; Kraushaar, 1980; Pitzer, 1997), failures and/or changes of communities (Pitzer, 1997; Kitts, 2000), and relationships to the outside world (Janzen, 1981; Oved, 1983). Most studies of internal relationships within intentional communities concentrate on sexual mores within communities (e.g., see Andelson, 1985; Foster, 1981, 1991 & 2002; J. C. Lauer & R. H. Lauer, 1983), but a contemporary exception to this is Kamau's (2002) study of community-building mechanisms using the processes of liminality, *communitas* and charisma. In the field of cultural anthropology, liminality and *communitas* are deemed to be useful concepts for understanding the patterns of social interaction that help to build community (e.g., see Andelson, 2002; S. L. Brown, 2002a; Kamau, 2002). In this socio-psychological study, in addition to looking at social processes, I analyze the beliefs and values of individual Aurovilians that foster or thwart liminality and *communitas* by viewing these concepts as psychological states in the individual and the group.

Commitment Mechanisms in Communities

Kanter's (1972) work on commitment is considered to be indispensable to understanding both the sociology of organizations (Pitts, 1973) as well as internal relationships in intentional communities (Van Wormer, 2004). Defining commitment as the "the willingness of people to do what will help maintain the

group because it provides what they need,” Kanter argues that the success of a community depends largely on their ability to build commitment in their members (p. 66). Linking self-interest to social requirement, Kanter points out that the individual and the community must be bonded in a mutually-beneficial relationship where individuals are not asked to sacrifice more than what they get back from the community. Kanter distinguishes between three types of commitment mechanisms that bond the individual to the social organization: moral, instrumental, and affective. For Kanter successful communities are those that have lasted for 25 years or more having ensured their longevity by having one or more of these commitment mechanisms in place.

Moral commitment pertains to upholding the values and norms and obeying the authority of the group. Individual identity is reformulated to meet the ideals of the group. At its best, moral commitment is internalized by the member: “When demands made by the system are evaluated as right, moral, just, or expressing one’s own values, obedience to these demands becomes a normative necessity, and sanctioning by the system is regarded as appropriate” (Kanter, 1972, p. 69). The interrelated mechanisms for achieving this type of commitment are mortification and transcendence. Mortification involves giving up one’s former individual identity for an identity formulated by the group, while transcendence requires individuals to abrogate their decision-making power to the greater entity of the group.

Instrumental commitment entails the continued participation of individuals in the social system. Individual members, according to Kanter (1972), continue to

remain in the system because the price for leaving is greater than staying in the system. Instrumental commitment is sustained by the mechanisms of sacrifice and investment. Members are required to make a personal sacrifice in order to join the community and the greater the sacrifice, the greater the ensuing commitment. This sacrifice often entails giving up control of individual resources. Investment guarantees the member “a stake in the group” (Kanter, p. 72). With economic profits accruing only from the group, the member’s participation in the group is ensured.

Affective or emotional commitment is necessary for group cohesion and to ensure that the group is capable of sticking together in the face of external threats. Mechanisms sustaining affective commitment are renunciation and communion. Renunciation involves “giving up competing relationships outside the communal group and individualistic, exclusive attachments within,” and communion brings individual members into a meaningful emotional contact with the whole group building a “we-feeling” (Kanter, 1972, p. 73).

Auroville approaching its fortieth year is clearly a successful community by Kanter’s definition, but using survival as a yardstick for success has been criticized notably by Abrams and McCullough (1976), but also by Van Wormer (2004) and Pillai (2005). Andelson (2002) finds Kanter’s work to be too static in that Kanter merely counts the number of commitment mechanisms present in any given community without deeper analyses of the intentionality behind the mechanisms, how these mechanisms change with time, or even what percentage of the group’s members subscribed to them in the first place. Finally, given the

fact that the communes Kanter declares to be successful are all religious utopias held together by a central authoritative body, it is questionable as to how apt is her sociological analysis to other forms of communities, like Auroville, that lack strong institutional structures. In my study I found that commitment, to a large extent, is not imposed from the outside; it is formed by each individual's engagement with Auroville.

Kanter believes that communities maintain moral commitment because individuals give up their former sense of identity and develop a new self-identity by accepting the "stronger influence of the utopian group" (1972, p. 73). If one examines Auroville's ideals, however, one realizes that an Aurovilian is not so much required to sacrifice his or her former identity as asked to expand it to embrace a wider transpersonal sense of identity. In the text "To be a True Aurovilian," the Mother writes:

The first necessity is the inner discovery by which one learns who one really is behind the social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At our inmost centre there is a free being, wide and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the acting centre of our being and our life in Auroville. (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200)

One is asked to be free from moral and social conventions as well as from the desires of one's ego. In Auroville, mortification, as defined by Kanter, is not something imposed by the group. It is left to the free will of individual Aurovilians to progressively adopt the ideals of Auroville. In Chapter 6, I examine the development of a new sense of identity and the expansion of self-identity among Aurovilians, but here I would like to note that precisely because the ideals of Auroville are not imposed by an authoritative body one gets the

sense that individuals struggle within themselves as they seek to free themselves from their conditioning and commit themselves to Auroville's ideals. For example, mulling on the challenges of Auroville, one of my survey respondents said:

There are of course also the difficulties to overcome—for example the attachment to the idea that money should be more available to do what I desire—which by the way is not necessarily what would be best for me or probably for what I came to do in Auroville. (Appendix F)

Another person reflected, “Auroville's *raison d'être* makes one have so many more responsibilities on oneself—so hard on oneself” (Appendix F).

There are no official mechanisms to ensure the transcendence that Kanter (1972) speaks of in Auroville. The final authority for all internal matters in Auroville rests with its Residents' Assembly. Decisions by the Residents' Assembly are currently made on the basis of a majority vote and not by consensus, as is the case in most intentional communities. So Aurovilians are not required to surrender their prerogative for taking decisions to a higher social power. If there are issues within the community or decisions taken by working groups that an individual is unhappy with, there are community forums such as the weekly *News and Notes* and *AV Net* (an electronic forum) wherein concerned individuals can express their dissatisfaction. Individual Aurovilians also have the right to convene Residents' Assemblies to redress issues, subject to following an agreed procedure.

It could be mentioned here that in the lack of formal mechanisms to bring about transcendence the decision-making process in Auroville, until recently, has been extremely challenging, and even psychologically painful at an interpersonal

level. Until 2007, decisions of the Residents' Assembly were often hamstrung because of the inability of the community to agree on anything. In 2007, responding to a warning from the Governing Board that if the Residents' Assembly could not come to a decision then the Governing Board, as per the Auroville Foundation Act, would arrogate the right to make decisions for the community, the Working Committee successfully managed to put in place a system of decision-making by majority vote (Carel, 2007). Until this historic decision, I have witnessed numerous Residents' Assemblies where the decision-making process was fraught with problems of ill-informed people publicly slandering individuals or groups that sought to get a proposal approved. Alan^{xxxviii} (2007b), in an article on this topic, expresses his sadness at the unkindness with which Aurovilians treat each other—people do not seek to understand one another's viewpoints and blatantly disregard the other's feelings. This issue, forming as it does a shadow of the ideal of human unity, is discussed at length in a subsequent section. It is remarkable that Aurovilians continue to remain committed to Auroville despite such problematic social relationships. This commitment, given the absence of formal commitment structures, is a deeply personal one.

As commitment in Auroville is a personal issue, it varies widely from individual to individual. In the economic realm of instrumental commitment, socio-economic factors play a role resulting in different forms of commitment for different sections of the society. One also notes a change in commitment forms and mechanisms in the economic sector over time.

The economic sector in Auroville is structured not just by Auroville's ideals, but also, to a certain extent, by the legal status of Auroville within India. Though Aurovilians have no restrictions imposed on their lifestyle, the ideal is to be free from the sense of personal possession. As Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole, all immovable assets, such as houses and other buildings, are not legally owned by the persons who build them but collectively held by the community. In the early years there was merely an accepted agreement about this in the community. Since the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act in 1988, the Auroville Foundation, constituted by the Government of India, is the legal trustee of the assets of Auroville.

Currently, Aurovilians as well as Newcomers wishing to join Auroville are required to contribute Rs. 1500 (>US \$40) per month to the Central Fund of the community, and even here there are exceptions to the rule, or the money for this contribution is generated from within Auroville itself. Entry Services policies currently require all Newcomers to additionally pay a one-time registration fee of Rs. 8,000 (US \$200).

The Housing Service of Auroville lacks funds to build houses for its residents, and for most Aurovilians, building a house is the biggest personal investment they make in Auroville. One does not get back the investment one puts into the house, or in creating other permanent assets, if one leaves Auroville. Due to differences in the world economy, for most Indians, building a house in Auroville is the most significant economic investment that they make in their lives, which takes up most if not all of their savings. For Westerners, on the other

hand, this investment is proportionately less. So the sense of sacrifice varies among the different sections of Auroville's society; there are variations among Westerners as well. Some Westerners, who have been in Auroville for over 20 years or more, have used up their personal resources in developing and maintaining Auroville and are now left with little or no financial means. Generally speaking, their sacrifice has been considerably greater than many others who have joined Auroville in the last 5-10 years.

Joining Auroville does not require one to sacrifice any, let alone all, of one's personal resources for the common good. Auroville has been built and continues to be built by the personal resources of Aurovilians, but these are freely donated to the community. In August 2007, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation estimated that 95% of the total value of Auroville's assets had been either contributed by Aurovilians or raised through Aurovilians' efforts as opposed to the 5% funds that came in from the Government of India (Carel, personal communication, August 30, 2007). In the early years, approximately up to the 1990s, before Auroville as an institution attracted significant funding, people tended to donate most or even all of their personal resources to the community—either to share in its running expenses or to put up infrastructure, solar panels, windmills, houses and the like. For instance, Charles, a greenbelter (Auroville's term for a forester), reforested and managed with a hired workforce, 175 acres of land for 20 years largely from his own personal resources. He recalls:

I was primarily responsible for running this place. And it required, on an average, Rs. 50,000 (US \$1,250) per month for its running expenses. I

would start early at 5am to take care of the animals, then at 8am, I would oversee the work in the carpentry unit, and then there were workers in the nursery and the forest and also, at one point, I was into food-processing—dried fruits, jams and the like. It was crazy. I was working 12-15 hours a day, and the thought of taking a holiday or even just taking the family to dinner in town never occurred. I was constantly busy. And then, in the summer months, I would go back home to Europe and earn money to spend for this community here (personal communication, September 15, 2007).

Charles' financial contribution alone over the years would easily amount to over a few million rupees for the common good, and this is just one example out of many. It is interesting to note that, perhaps inspired by the charismatic presence of the Mother or the heady idealism of wanting to create a better world out of barren earth, there was a greater sense of economic sharing in the early years of Auroville than exists at present. Partly because of this, and partly because of the smaller population of around 200 in those days, there seemed to a greater sense of community (Sullivan, 1994). Joining Auroville in those early years also meant sacrificing personal material comforts for often there was no electricity, no running water, and scant food on the table.

Today, with the development of Auroville's infrastructure, Auroville has become a more affluent settlement, and consequently most people do not have to cut down on their material comforts unless they voluntarily choose to do so. If anything, in certain aspects—fresh air, greenery, short commutes, slower pace of life, access to subsidized health facilities such as gyms, massage parlors and swimming pools, and access to Western consumer goods with India's growing participation in a globalized economy—one enjoys a good standard of living in Auroville at a significantly lower cost than in Western countries. Auroville also

provides free entertainment, subsidized education and basic health care, and a subsidy (called a “children’s maintenance”) for each school-going child. There could be an economic incentive for joining Auroville for many local people as they get to enjoy a better quality of life than they hitherto had in the villages. 12 local Tamil Aurovilian women whom I met as a group all unanimously agreed that their living conditions were better in Auroville than in the village. Arguably, and as pointed out by a Tamil interviewee, some Tamil Aurovilians continue to stay in Auroville, even when they do not resonate with its ideals, because of the material benefits it offers.

As the visa status granted by the Government of India declares foreign Aurovilians to be “voluntary workers,” there are restrictions against Aurovilians working outside and to the amount of money one can earn within Auroville. In general, while there are some exceptions, “maintenances” (salaries) within Auroville are depressed, and many people, especially those well educated, sacrifice the possibility to earn a higher salary outside when they join Auroville. This fact is clearly resented, and 12 survey respondents reported the lack of adequate finances as a challenging factor with one of them pointing out the discrepancy of being a voluntary worker and yet being increasingly asked to pay for everything.

As the Government does not have any control over Indian Aurovilians, such as visa regulations, there are some Indians who continue to engage in a business outside while living in Auroville (Pillai, 2001). In short, unlike the religious utopias studied by Kanter (1972), individual incomes are not always

solely derived from within Auroville. Without collecting personal data, it would be very hard to gauge whether it is economically easy or not for people to leave Auroville, should they choose to do so. But in general, it would seem that the economic cost of leaving Auroville is not so high, and an estimated 200 Aurovilians have been living outside Auroville for 3-5 years, though their names are still on the Residents' list, and perhaps an equal number or more have definitively left Auroville. Some of these ex-Aurovilians continue to maintain an active interest in Auroville's development. Though Kanter does not conceive of it as such, instrumental commitment to the community can also be indirectly derived in the sense that, in Auroville as with other communes, the longer people stay within the community, the harder is it for them to be re-socialized back into mainstream jobs and society. This is even truer of older members than younger ones. While I did not seek to directly research this issue, in casual conversations older Western Aurovilians mentioned that they no longer feel at home in their countries of origin or have strong emotional ties with their natal families. One of them also pointed out that relocating back to their home countries would be economically very difficult, as they have not had the opportunity to save or participate in a pension scheme, and their age would work against them in the job-market.

In her analysis of affective commitment, Kanter (1972) mentions that this mechanism is necessary for a group to face external threats. The most serious external threat that Auroville has faced in its lifetime, and which almost ended the experiment, occurred in the mid-seventies when after the demise of the Mother,

the Sri Aurobindo Society sought to gain full control over Auroville. As mentioned earlier, this move was strongly contested by most Aurovilians who believed that, as per the Mother's wishes, only those living in Auroville had the right to make decisions about Auroville. From 1974 till the intervention of the Government of India in 1980—fights, often violent—ensued between the two groups with the Sri Aurobindo Society hiring thugs to beat up Aurovilians, using the Indian police force to arrest and jail them on spurious charges, and even resorting to legal means of having their visas cancelled (Savitra, 1980); however, even in this extreme crisis, the Aurovilians were not bonded into a single group but divided into three factions. Many Aurovilians, as mentioned by A, find it miraculous that Auroville survived through this period, and they take it as a sign of Mother's force acting on this place. In another instance of an external threat, in 2004, a village gang murdered a young Aurovillian, and the general meeting that was then convened and in which I participated was marked by one of the highest attendances ever. At that meeting it was suggested that Auroville be closed to all outsiders for a day to mourn the brutal incident. While most working groups and units agreed to comply with the request, a couple of business units asserted their right to carry on their business as usual, even allowing their village labor force to come in for work. While most Aurovilians did not like this, they recognized that in Auroville no group had the right to impose decisions on other Aurovilians. In short, Auroville is not and has never been a tight-knit collectivity. There is just a loose sense of the collective that allows for the expression of a wide range of

opinions. And yet, despite its amorphous, ill-defined identity, and contrary to Kanter's expectations, Auroville somehow continues to develop.

As for renunciation of former bonds, given the lack of formal insulating structures in Auroville there is no need to give up former relationships, unless of course one to personally chooses to do so. There are absolutely no requirements for individuals to cut off former ties or bonds. Local Tamil Aurovilians usually tend to keep close ties with both their immediate and extended families who live in the villages, as culturally they are expected to do so. For Westerners, distance and costs are the restrictive factors in maintaining former social ties. A couple of my survey respondents said they found it a challenge to be so far away from their homeland and families; still, most Western Aurovilians regularly go back to their home countries to visit their families. One summer, Inside India, which was then the sole travel agency within Auroville, reported that they sold 3,000 flights out of Auroville that season.^{xxxix} So renouncing former relationships is not a commitment mechanism that is put in place by an authoritative body, but is again left to individual predilection.

In Auroville there is a significant amount of communion—the feeling of belonging to a group (Kanter, 1972)—as was discerned in the survey responses (see Appendix E). While some people reported that they liked the sense of community in general, others specifically mentioned that what they liked was “the honesty and goodwill,” “the quality of aspiration,” and the support they felt from Auroville as a family (Appendix E). Interestingly, a majority of the responses stated that they liked the diversity of Auroville. This finding directly supports

Auroville's vision to achieve a differentiated unity and contradicts Kanter's (1972) hypothesis that a collective group identity would not tolerate diversity.

As a matter of fact, though Kanter saw her work to be important for social organizational theory, and though her work has had significant influence in that regard, it does not really help us to understand commitment in the context of Auroville. The loosely bound, racially and economically diverse society of Auroville is marked by the absence of the formal and ideologically elaborate commitment mechanisms that Kanter speaks of. With no strong central authority, even the guidelines that are in place are often contested. Yet Auroville, starting its fifth decade, is seen by most people as one of the most successful intentional communities in the world. This points to a radical notion that Kanter overlooks in her analysis: Rather than objective commitment mechanisms that are inter-subjectively imposed by the group on individuals, commitments made by individuals out of their own free will without any coercion can be equally effective. In this regard my interviewee C said, she "feels an inner commitment to Auroville—to help build the city that the Mother wanted," and she believes that "most Aurovilians also have a similar inner commitment to Auroville." The phrase used by C, "to help build the city that Mother wanted," points to the commitment to a transpersonal ideal, and yet, unlike the religious utopias studied by Kanter, there is no one single interpretation of the ideal; rather the ideal is something that it is subjectively interpreted by individuals and even re-evaluated and re-interpreted in the course of time. An individual's relationship to Auroville's ideals is often characterized by what Buber (1970) terms as the holy I-

Thou relationship, where both subject and object are transformed in the relationship. As opposed to the I-It relationship where the relationship becomes fixated in a monological understanding of the object by the subject, an I-Thou relationship is characterized by the novelty of discovery—where the object is continually discovered by the subject through a process that is transformative for both (Buber, 1970). It is this subjective commitment to the ideals that has accounted for Auroville's success.

As I explore in Chapter 6, I believe, what has also accounted for Auroville's success is its permanently evolving character. With an ideology that encourages experimentation with life and without being restricted by a rigid, sacrosanct blueprint for development, Auroville, so far, has successfully adapted itself to meet external and internal contingencies. Auroville is characterized by a dynamic process that constantly re-evaluates and re-interprets the ideals in the light of reality. Swaminathan described life in Auroville as being “an evolving inspiration” explaining that one's understanding of oneself and of Auroville keeps changing. Like the modern kibbutz described by Cohen (1982) and the secular communes studied by Abrams and McCullough (1976), Auroville's very flexibility accounts for its success. In short, in the light of the Auroville experiment, Kanter's (1972) theory, while applicable to authoritative, religious utopias, is inadequate to understand group-bonding processes and the viability of secular social organizations.

Liminality and Communitas

S. L. Brown's (2002b) recent anthology on intentional communities seeks to understand internal processes within intentional communities and their relationship to mainstream society, the larger nation-state. Each of the six case studies in the anthology utilizes V. Turner's (1969) influential anthropological theory of liminality and communitas to explore processes of community building.

In the anthropological understanding of rituals, liminality is defined as a transitional stage, characterized by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, where one's former sense of identity is dissolved to a certain extent (Van Gennep, 1960; V. Turner, 1969). Kamau (2002), following V. Turner's (1974) lead, maintains that intentional communities, being differentiated from mainstream society, are always in a liminal stage, and that experience of liminality promotes communitas, or a sense of community. In her comparative study, Kamau investigates the ways in which liminal processes are respectively maintained and disregarded in two communes, the Harmony Society and the Community of Equality, and concludes that intentional communities with marginal liminality and no communitas do not have a chance of surviving.

In her analysis, Kamau (2002) takes into account only territorial notions of community, but there can also be a relational notion of community that is based on social network relationships (Chioneso, 2004). Arguably, in an intentional community like Auroville, that is both geographical and relational, there would be little liminality but a wider sense of communitas—that is, a wider group of people who relate to the community of Auroville. Auroville's permeable boundaries

make it weakly liminal. As in Robert Owen's *Community of Equality* (Kamau, 2002), people can move in and out of Auroville at will. Besides, given Auroville's ideal of being "the city the earth needs" (Alfassa, 1980, p. 206) and its institutional affiliations with the Government of India, UNESCO and the Auroville International Association, Auroville, far from severing ties with the outside world, seeks to maintain its social network of relationships. It is feebly liminal by choice and yet, counter to Kamau's hypothesis, it shows no signs of disintegrating. While Kamau (2002) uses the concept of liminality to differentiate an intentional community from outside society, following V. Turner (1967, 1969) I find it a useful notion to describe a new member's entry into Auroville and also to examine other processes that are marked by liminality.

In examining liminality in the ritualistic process, V. Turner (1967, 1969) distinguishes between the adept and the neophyte maintaining that neophytes remain in a liminal state till they are accepted as adepts. In Auroville, there is a formal, administrative procedure that a new person has to follow to join Auroville. As this is done on an individual basis, it can hardly be described as a collective ritual. Rather, to the contrary, when an Aurovilian woman suggested that Auroville adopts a formal, ritualistic process to mark a person's entry into Auroville, such as give each new community member, a ring with the Mother's symbol, the proposal was immediately vetoed by others on the ground that it sounded "too cultish" (personal communication, September 7, 2007). Without formal, ritualistic processes to mark one's acceptance into the community, the experience of starting a new life in Auroville is individually mediated, and

liminality, as characterized by openness and a loss of one's former identity, is individually and not collectively experienced. For many, instead of the ambiguity and indeterminacy that are the hallmarks of liminality, there is the opposite feeling, as was reported by two of my interviewees, that one has "arrived home." There is a deep sense of fulfillment, as though one finally found something that was missing in one's previous life, and because of this feeling, one's former life and identity loses its value. Carol and Swaminathan both mentioned that joining Auroville was like starting a new life.

In the early years of Auroville, from 1968 to 1973, the Mother personally selected people as Aurovilians. This process of selection was marked by liminality. The charisma of the Mother and the Aurovilians' connection to her was a source of *communitas*. Sonia, who recollects the experience of her early days in Auroville when she had just newly arrived, best describes these feelings of liminality and *communitas*:

It was just before the Nov 24th *darshan*. And in Aspiration [one of the first communities in Auroville] I got to know a few people, and on 24th there was a transport going down, and we all went and spent the whole day in Pondy because Mother was giving her balcony *darshan* in the evening; so after that we were driving up in this beaten-up little white Citroen van—it was regular transport in those days, packed together with people, people you don't know at all and yet there was that very, very special feeling that these people are my closest family, that all my own relatives, family, friends, that nobody is so close to me as these people because of Mother. That was a very special memorable moment.

Psychologically, the liminal experience of being open to something new that one cannot quite describe is a cherished memory for Sonia. Continuing her reminiscences of the early days in Auroville, she says: "that sense of living in a

miraculous air and a world of miracle—when we get a breath of that again for any reason, it's very special.”

Comparing Auroville to the mystical community of Damanhur in Italy, an Aurovilian who had experimented living at both places pointed out that Damanhur had a very hierarchical society where the neophytes, people who have newly joined the community, are clearly distinguished from the spiritual adepts who are engaged in secret rites and processes. In contrast, she found Auroville far more egalitarian with information being accessible to all (personal communication January 18, 2007). Thus Auroville is only weakly liminal in this respect as distinctions between Newcomers and Aurovilians are minimal. Nevertheless, the one-year entry process is a liminal stage for Newcomers who have to decide if Auroville's really their place or not and also are dependent on the approval of the community before becoming full members. Liminality among Newcomers, currently, seems to be individually experienced and does not promote *communitas* among them. An Aurovilian woman who periodically organizes get-togethers for Newcomers mentioned to me how she took a group of Newcomers for a celebratory dinner at a restaurant, only to find that instead of mingling with one another, the “Western Europeans sat at one end of the table and had a hearty meal, the Russians sat at the middle and just had some soup, while the Indians sat at the other end and ordered a standard Indian meal” (personal communication, September 7, 2007). At one such get-together that I attended, only four Newcomers showed up, though according to the Entry Service statistics, there must have been at least seventy Newcomers in the community.

Finally, Aurovilians, because of their ideals and their inner spiritual quest, are always suspended in a liminal stage where they have not yet manifested the new society and the new species predicted by their spiritual teachers, and nor can they fully accept the values of the mainstream society anymore. Liminality in such a case can cause existential angst, as Sonia describes:

The special challenge of Auroville is that all of us, and this includes even our local Tamil Aurovilians, by choosing to become part of Auroville, you step out of the comfortable, familiar set of customs and standards that you have absorbed since babyhood without even noticing that that's the way you've organized your life—so here we come and everything is challenging. Everyone is in exile here because the country that we want to immigrate to doesn't exist yet. We miss the old comforts and the sure, easy familiar ways of doing things and that new way that we have committed ourselves to, we don't find it and we have to create it; so, this is absolutely challenging to everybody on a vital, physical, and mental level.

Liminality in Auroville could also be due to the present confused reality of Auroville and the hypothetical perfect future city posited by Auroville's town planners as per the Mother's vision. In such a case the liminality stage is not a temporary one as it is in a ritual, but an extended one. In a spiritual sense, in Integral Yoga, the liminal experience is to be valued for psychologically it is marked by a certain openness to the future without being determined by one's past identity. In day-to-day life, however an extended liminal state can negatively result in anxiety and anomie within oneself, as when Alan points out that Aurovilians have "doubts concerning Auroville and our place here" (2007b, p. 3). A couple of survey-respondents expressed their doubt as to whether Auroville would actually manifest its ideals or become just another town in India. Glenn captures this existential apprehension of Aurovilians in his remark, "If *that*

Auroville of models and plans is the true reality then *this* [emphases in original] Auroville before us is a failure” (1979, p. 54).

It could also be argued that the intensity and the experience of liminality vary among the different races of Auroville’s society. Western Aurovilians, despite their living in India for decades, are still treated as “outsiders” both by the immediate rural population and the Government of India. This creates considerable existential angst, as illustrated by a respondent: “The fact that after more than 30 years living in Auroville a ‘foreigner’ can be expelled from India with no legal way to return to the country” (Appendix F). A British Aurovillian pointed out that such expulsion has dire economic consequences for people like him who have been in Auroville since the early days as they neither have the finances, namely an adequate pension, to live in the West nor do they easily find a job having been out of the workforce for so long (personal communication, December, 4, 2007).

For the local Tamil Aurovilians, the condition of liminality is internalized. There are no obvious markers such as skin color that sets them apart from the local non-Aurovillian population. Consequently, it is harder for their friends and families living in villages adjacent to Auroville to accept their different status. In such cases it would seem that the individual is more challenged to affirm his or her self-identity, as when a Tamil woman states, “Compare [sic] to other women (girls) from the village, I can see myself a different soul. I am her child. So this is my place” (Appendix F).

Closely linked to the concept of liminality is the concept of *communitas* in V. Turner's (1969) theory. *Communitas*, akin to Kanter's (1972) concept of communion in affective commitment, is an intense feeling of togetherness, of social equality and solidarity among relative strangers. It is a characteristic feeling among people who have experienced liminality together, but *communitas* born of a liminal experience is usually transient (Kamau, 2002). V. Turner (1969, p. 132) distinguishes between *existential or spontaneous communitas*—the transient personal experience of togetherness, *normative communitas*—existential *communitas* that is organized into a permanent social system, and *ideological communitas*—existential *communitas* that is sustained by a shared ideology as is characteristic of many utopian social models.

V. Turner's (1969) model of social relations is a dynamic model that shows how different forms of *communitas* can manifest at different stages during the life cycle of a religious community. At the outset, religious groups are characterized by simplified social relations, with little or no structure, and are marked by openness and economic equality among their members. Rituals and myth are elaborated as the group experiences spontaneous *communitas*. In its early years, till the demise of the Mother in 1973, Auroville, with a considerably smaller population of about 200, clearly exhibited social characteristics common to all incipient religious groups—the lack of structure, openness, and economic equality. While elaborate rituals have never been part of Auroville's social life, there was still a mythic quality about living in Auroville then. For instance, one older Aurovilian told me that in those early years, he was engaged in austere

spiritual practices with complete faith in the physical transformation of the body (personal communication, December 26, 2006). Ordinary life takes mythic proportions: Bhavana, a long-term Aurovilian, recalls how she worked, milking cows in Auro-Dairy, feeling that “*because of Her* [The Mother; emphasis in original], whatever I did in Auroville would be of service to the whole world” (Darshan, 2006, p. 192). As has been widely documented in sociological and anthropological literature, the charismatic presence of a spiritual leader also fosters spontaneous *communitas* among the followers (e.g., see Kamau, 2002; Weber, 1968), as they feel connected with one another because of their connection to the leader. Sonia’s following description of her early years in Auroville is perhaps an example of both spontaneous and ideological *communitas*:

Well, when I look back my feeling is, that when there were far fewer people here and all of them personally accepted by Mother, there was a very general understanding that we are here to do her work and that she knows best and some kind of commitment to the yoga process, to Sri Aurobindo’s yoga—that was somehow a generally shared thing which maybe isn’t so any more.

It is a matter of conjecture as to how much *communitas* was actually present in those early days, for there are also historical accounts about differences between Aurovilians (e.g., see Sullivan, 1994). Sonia later admits, “perhaps it [the feeling that we are all here for the Mother and the yoga] wasn’t quite as universal as it seemed to me at that time.” In 1972 the Mother herself says of Auroville, “We are preaching unity—unity of humanity—and we are all quarrelling—horrible quarrels, resentments and all sorts of urgings that we condemn in the others” (Alfassa, 1983, pp. 124-125).

In the next phase of a group's development, the group becomes more pragmatic as it is forced to organize itself better in order to have more control over economic resources. As they get more structured, the groups exhibit normative *communitas* by seeking to capture the earlier feeling of spontaneous *communitas* through the institution of ethical precepts and legal rules. Since the Mother passed away, after a chaotic period from 1974 to 1980 when it was engaged in a conflict with Sri Aurobindo Society, Auroville has been progressively moving towards a more stable and legally acceptable status. While the increased involvement of the Government of India since the 1980s has partly led to this institutionalization, the need for clear precepts and guidelines also arose from the increase of population over the years. Sociologically, as mentioned earlier, in a society led by a charismatic leader, the demise of the leader precipitates a crisis and results in a routinization of charisma where the enthusiasm for and commitment to a charismatic leader is replaced by pragmatic needs and structures to make a living from the calling (Parsons, 1964); however, Leard (1993) points out that Aurovilians, because of their spiritual ideals, successfully resist the routinization process. I examine this issue in greater detail in Chapter 6 dealing with the nature of a spiritual society. I would just like to point out that, according to V. Turner (1969), the move towards a structured society is directly detrimental to fostering spontaneous *communitas* and can cause groups to fractionalize.

Successful religious groups, that is, groups that resist fractionalization, are characterized by a third type of *communitas* called ideological *communitas* (V.

Turner, 1969). For V. Turner ideological *communitas* is intentionally structured by the central authority of the group, which by providing liminal experiences within centralized social processes allows the religious movement to survive even while becoming highly institutionalized. Thus V. Turner states that in ideological *communitas*, “what one culturally does is conceived as merely instrumental to the aim of attaining and maintaining *communitas*” (1969, p. 177-78). Ideological *communitas* is often supported by a belief that Divine intervention will definitively precipitate this idealized *communitas*.

A future idealized state is part of Aurovilians’ beliefs, as is indicated by the following responses from two respondents to the question as to what inspires them about Auroville:

The hope that one day Auroville will be a place where everyone who lives here will truly have good will and be willing to learn the skills needed to realize human unity.

Serving a great vision and the ideas that could lead India and mankind to their highest destiny. (Appendix E)

Such beliefs help people to persevere in this experiment of human unity with current dissatisfaction being tolerated in the hope of a better future. States an Aurovilian, “Whatever the difficulties, I am in Auroville to learn what it means: Auroville’s “raison d’etre” is to hasten the manifestation of the Supramental Force.” It needs to be clarified, however, that Aurovilians are aware that the promised better future will be a better future for all of earth and is not likely to happen in their lifetime and thus benefit them personally. At the focus group interview, participants concurred as to how the ideals that they were seeking to manifest in their lives were so novel and visionary that it was only natural it

would take a few generations for these ideals to take hold of the human imagination and thereby become embodied more concretely. In this respect Auroville differs from religious groups, especially Christian or millennial religious groups, which believe that their community alone would benefit from the promised Divine future (e.g., see Siegler, 2002 on the community of In Search of Truth).

Ideological *communitas*, as defined by V. Turner (1969), can never be intentionally created in Auroville given its lack of a strong, central authority. Auroville's ideal itself, as repeatedly stated by the Mother, is for all individuals to find the inner truth of their being and not to seek to impose it on anyone else. Given these ideals, liminal experiences are never sought to be imposed on the community. Community gatherings, such as collective meditations, sharing one's personal experiences of the Mother, and "rituals"—namely the pre-dawn bonfires in the Peace Area and the silent gathering on New Year's Eve at the Tibetan Pavilion with a "thousand-light mandala"—are organized by different groups and provide for collective, liminal experiences. But precisely because these events are not mandatory, Carol likes to attend such gatherings and feel a sense of community. In contrast, however, D completely derides the notion of needing to experience *communitas* at the annual bonfire on Auroville's birthday. Instead he seeks to remember and recreate his experience of the Mother, that transformative, personal liminal experience, which remains the abiding reason for his continued participation in Auroville.

Despite the resistance of Aurovilians to the imposition of structures, it is important to note that, as V. Turner points out, “communitas can be grasped only in some relation to structure” (1969, p. 127). My study indicated that in Auroville the realization that one is not alone on one’s spiritual quest but part of a group with shared ideology created enough of a structure that allowed for the expression of communitas. Sonia describes how when she walked out of her house to attend the focus group interview that I had organized, she noticed the number of people who were busy doing different things that afternoon. She mused aloud at the interview:

Somehow there’s so much going on. People are really working hard, doing their best. We don’t know quite why they are pouring all their energy into this place, into these efforts. What is it that’s driving us? I don’t know whether it’s inspiration or what it is. But it’s very, very nice to see all these things.

Such feelings of communitas can also, on occasion, lead to forgiveness and healing, as when a woman notes how upon seeing her neighbor at the bonfire, a person with whom she had had a conflict, she felt this sense of forgiveness realizing that they both were equally drawn to Auroville’s ideals (as cited in Pillai, 2005). In the eleven individual survey responses below, it can be seen that, while different reasons were cited for the generation of communitas, most simultaneously made a reference to the existence of the larger group:

The diversity and the fact that most of the people who live here try to aspire to a “higher” life.

To join a group of people from different nationalities who have the same ideals.

I like living in Auroville because of a common feeling about responsibility for it (not everyone, but most people I know well).

Living in a proximity of people who draw their inspiration from the vision and work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

The possibility to try and become a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness—which is an accepted thing just like doing your Pour Tous [Auroville’s general store] shopping and not a thing which is ‘crazy’ for people. Living in a community of people who are travelers on the path.

In one or other way every one is trying the same and are proud of us all for not easily giving up.

It’s a place that has given me a lot . . . to know that somewhere we are all seekers and all struggling in our quests.

Sharing the conscious co-creation for our evolution—sharing a commitment to growth inner and outer and to the well-being of all—living in Unity in Diversity, slow as it may seem at times—living with so much open-ended possibility to explore, create and manifest what one is guided to do.

Collective life, peaceful living and aspiring towards higher consciousness.

Trying to live together in a spirit of love, respect, harmony in order to build together the city of the future.

The people—quality of aspiration, self-giving for an ideal, depth. To give your experience and energy to Auroville community. (Appendix E)

According to Benn’s (1982) classification of communities on the basis of the nature of the social interactions and *communitas* in the community, Auroville can be categorized as a “comradely community.” A comradely community, generally large in size, allows for maximum autonomy to its members while still cohering as a community by virtue of the fact that all members share a common fate. In such a community, “each participant has a concern for every other which is different in quality and degree from the concern he has for non-participants, and different just because the person is a participant. The relation is not personalized, however” (Benn, 1982, p. 59). As Benn says, the *communitas* fostered in a

comradely community like Auroville or a large modern kibbutz is due to the awareness that others like oneself have chosen to be part of a certain social experiment and share a common fate. While Aurovilians are open to others—friends of Auroville, visitors, employees, Government officials—there seems to be a special concern extended to those who show the commitment to join and live in Auroville on a permanent basis.

Shadow Issues in Fostering Communitas in Auroville

Kamau observes, “Explicitly or implicitly, the feeling of communitas is desired by many members of intentional communities, because it can make the renunciation of the world seem worthwhile (2002, p. 25).” So it is not surprising that in response to the question about challenges in Auroville, many Aurovilians commented on the lack of communitas in Auroville. The lack of communitas—the in fighting, division, ill-will and distrust—however, is ironically in contradiction to and clearly a shadow issue of the ideals of human unity and of true community. To highlight how prevalent this shadow is in Auroville’s current psychological make-up I quote examples from 16 survey respondents:

The lack of cohesion and unity in implementing the Vision and the resulting in fighting, disagreements, and accusations.

The daily interaction with other Aurovilians, that is quite conflicting. In a project of this nature we can expect a big amount of conflicts and misunderstandings but to face it daily is quite challenging.

The occasional moralistic/judgmental tendencies; often a surprising lack of clear, conscious, positive communication.

That constantly you are getting judged and judging others.

The negative feelings held by Aurovilians against other Aurovilians.

Manifesting sincere understanding, collaboration and love. Making up with each other. Overcoming resistances in ourselves and in work and relationship. We lack here understanding, love, compassion. Instead of emulating ourselves to progress together as brothers and sisters, we rather fight against each other.

Egotism in dealing with each other where one would expect more, considering our shared ideals.

‘Challenging’ about living here is the lack of decision-making, the lack of openness, the lack of sincerity, the differences in material well-being not leading to respect, love and understanding each other, but to jealousy and social problems.

I miss the cooperation here to work together, and how to organize this here.

The lack of heart. There seems to be an emotional hole in Auroville and I do not feel that I can express myself emotionally.

Often I miss the “sharing” from the heart among us, the subtle love—language, the smiles, the recognition that we are, in fact, brothers and sisters.

Lack of a shared commitment to conscious, compassionate communication: not feeling/experiencing a shared depth of intention to confront both our personal and collective shadow and to actively move forward/through it—i.e. to disassemble the ‘stories’ we live by.

I miss too often the regard to dignity of man. (sorry for my bad English).

The lack of friendship and friendliness among Aurovilians.

The small-mindedness of some Aurovilians.

The village character, the gossip, greed. (Appendix F)

The diversity of cultures and temperaments and the diversity of interpretations of the ideals and opinions on how to best implement the vision are undoubtedly challenging factors that prevent *communitas* in Auroville; but ideologically perhaps, Aurovilians subconsciously do not make an effort to be more loving, believing—as the Mother (Alfassa, 1979) said—that an actual

human unity comes about only with a spiritual realization of experiencing oneness with all and not by any outer means. Such a belief, perhaps mistakenly, emphasizes the individual and the need for individual progress rather than our relational need for *communitas*. Also, given the philosophical and intellectual base of Integral Yoga, qualities of the heart, though valued by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, are often overlooked in the practice of the yoga. Specifically in the context of Auroville, in the early days the physical environment was extremely challenging and one needed to have “masculine” skills of agency, endurance and self-reliance in order to survive. Consequently, these qualities have always been valued in Auroville over the “feminine” qualities of caring and communion.

Still, a lack of sharing does not necessarily equate to being deliberately nasty and hostile—many interpersonal exchanges in Auroville and larger meetings are unfortunately marked by outbursts of antagonism and unfriendliness. Muni, an Aurovilian, commenting on the interpersonal exchange at a general meeting, wrote on the community’s online forum, the *AV Net*: “Its [*sic*] disturbing that we Aurovilians still don’t trust each other; Its disturbing that people keep saying things based on rumors and keep spreading hate and mistrust. . . . Its disturbing that defamation is the trend of the day” (personal communication, Sep 16, 2007, n. p.). Alan (2007 b), despairing at the growing ill-will that often marks Auroville’s collective meetings, notes that Aurovilians have a propensity “for truth over love” (p. 3). Part of the problem here seems to be that Aurovilians do not hesitate to state their truth vehemently without showing an equal passion for understanding the truth of others as the Mother enjoined them to. This often leads

to bitter and sometimes irresolvable conflicts leading to even a greater frustration among Aurovilians for “there is no real justice when there are deep problems” (Appendix F).^{x1}

There is a considerable gap here between the ideal and the practice. As per Auroville’s ideal, the basis for this experiment in human unity is goodwill with all differing individual viewpoints being harmonized by a greater synergetic vision or truth. Alan feels that, in practice, the way Aurovilians deal with each other reveals their own dissatisfaction, insecurities and frustrations concerning Auroville and their place within it. All this, Alan continues, “manifests not in honest self-examination but in dogmatic espousals of high ideals or in attacks against authority, against the ‘other’ whom we claim is oppressing us and leading us astray” (2007b, p. 3). Analyzing this shadow issue, Sonia opines that all Aurovilians, by joining Auroville, have made a choice to be free from the social and cultural moorings of their previous lifestyle, and this creates a certain angst, often unconscious, which is expressed as resentment towards the others, especially when things go wrong.

Unlike mainstream societies, where structures of class, race and gender determine and restrict self-expression, communities such as Auroville allow for the growth and expression of the whole person; however, as Simmel (1955) points out, the more people relate to one another as whole persons, the greater the risk that any dispute between them will engage the whole personality and totally explode the relationship. Simmel makes this point with regard to the ferocity of domestic quarrels in intimate relationships, but it also seems to hold true of

relationships in Auroville where people, as D notes in an interview, still carry grudges against each other after years or even decades. Only perhaps in certain individual cases, as a couple of people pointed out, conflicts serve as a means to deepen self-questioning—of looking within oneself—to find the source of conflict.

Sociological Perspectives

In bringing a sociological perspective to bear on Auroville, I follow the lead of Abrams and McCullough's (1976) detailed qualitative study of British communes from a sociological perspective. In their commissioned study of the social relevance of communes, Abrams and McCullough, focusing on seven social issues—generational issues, family structure, women's liberation, alternative concept of work and leisure, sense of identity, community and politics of revolution conclude that the biggest lesson that communal living holds for social policy is to highlight urgent problems within mainstream society. Abrams and McCullough point out that communal living, by definition, will always be “essentially oppositional” to a capitalistic society (p. 218). The prevailing assumption in Abrams and McCullough's study is that communes are an alternative to mainstream capitalistic society that seek to institutionalize friendship as the basis of social life. Consequently, their focus is not so much on religious/mystical communes as on secular communes that do not have more than 25 members.

Auroville, as a growing town with a spiritual basis and a population of about 2,000, is significantly different from the communes studied by Abrams and

McCullough. As per its ideals, Auroville does not see itself so much as an alternative to capitalistic society as an experiment to transform this society by consciously engaging with it. Taking the cue from my data, I focus on attitudes towards work and the relation between the individual and the community in Auroville. Currently, Auroville is paradoxically an alternative to mainstream society by fostering alternative attitudes and ideals towards life, as well as part of mainstream society through the social networks it establishes and maintains at an individual and collective level.

Work and Social Organization

Within sociology itself there is a long tradition that seeks to distinguish between community and society. Tönnies (1887/1963) was the first to analyze the transition from communal, agricultural societies organized at a local level to modern, industrialized societies organized at national level. Delineating a social psychology, Tönnies conceived the formation of societies as expressions of the human will, characterized either by a preference of *Gemeinschaft* (community) or *Gesellschaft* (society). Unlike Tönnies, Durkheim (1893/1933), seeking to establish sociology as a distinct scientific discipline, claimed that independent and objective social facts rather than individual actions were responsible for social formation. For Durkheim it was the division of labor that marked the change from traditional to modern societies. Traditional societies were characterized by relatively undifferentiated and interchangeable economic roles, while modern societies are based on highly specialized economic tasks. Terming the bonding present among the individual members of societies as social solidarity, Durkheim

argued that the solidarity in traditional societies was mechanical and resulted from a shared homogenous identity where people feel connected to one another because of the similarities in work, education, religion, and lifestyle. On the other hand, social solidarity in modern societies, termed by Durkheim as organic solidarity, was brought about by the necessity of interdependence on one another due to the differentiated roles of the individuals.^{xli}

Elaborating on the dualistic base on which Western thought is constructed, Abrams and McCullough (1976) point out that Durkheim's (1893/1933) analysis of social solidarity is based on an erroneous assumption of the dichotomy between the social and the individual. The problem of analyzing communities from the perspective of sociology stems from the fact that most communities see themselves as being anti-institutional and experiment with relationships between the self and society that cannot be defined by the deeply dualistic criteria of mainstream sociology. Intentional communities, by their organization and by their concept of a human being, subjectively and objectively blur the distinction between the self and the social in ways that make it difficult for sociologists "to catch it in the interpretive nets of class and status, compliance and domination . . . action and order, mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity, communities and associations" (Abrams & McCullough, 1976, p. 7). Thus, describing intentional communities from sociological perspectives limits and distorts the reality of the communal experiment. Little wonder then, as Abrams and McCullough point out and as an Aurovilian decisively rejecting participation in my study also did,

academic analyses are inadequate vehicles to express the deeper reality of the community (personal communication, January 15, 2007).

Additionally, Tönnies, Durkheim and other sociologists assume that societies are formed around work, and work is driven by individual economic motives. While work is a fundamental economic necessity of human life, intentional communities rarely, if ever, institute work and economic profits as their primary intentions. Work, while essential for the running of the community, is secondary to its primary intention. Auroville, aiming at the establishment of a spiritual society, views work and economics—the production and distribution of wealth—in terms of spiritual values rather than material necessities. Ideally, work in Auroville “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 . . . would provide for each individual’s subsistence” (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94). This ideal practically manifests itself in the fact that Aurovilians give themselves the freedom to change their place and type of work, regardless of whether they have the necessary qualifications or experience for a particular job. On the issue of work, survey responses such as these three were common:

The freedom to work in areas I’m interested but not educated in.

The freedom to find one’s deeper self and one’s own work.

The inner experience, possibilities to take up different works regardless of ‘official’ qualifications. (Appendix E)

Carol mentions, in the focus group interview, how she started a successful high school in Auroville, without any former qualifications whatsoever in terms of

teacher training or educational administration. This ability to simply offer a new service or start a new project that is needed by the community is experienced, as described by both Carol and Sarah, as being inspiring and fulfilling. Sonia, like Carol, is a key person in a group that envisioned and built an important educational center, but for Sonia this center was not even so much a community need as a project that she feels is driven by a transcendental force: “Sometimes my staff members feel ‘Oh, Sonia, why are you pushing things?’ I’m not pushing anything, there’s an engine driving this and we have to keep up with it, whatever it costs us personally—it’s really my experience.”

The Ideal of Voluntary Service

The Mother also specified that Auroville is a place for “Karma Yoga” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 228), that is, a place for realizing the Divine by offering one’s work as service to the Divine. Four people, in their community survey, even though they were not specifically asked to comment on their attitude to work, said that what they liked about Auroville was Karma Yoga, which one defined as “all work is for the Divine, not for a paycheck” (Appendix E). One described her work as “the most wonderful and powerful experience” as she did not have to work for herself anymore (Appendix E). An interviewee C, who resonates with the ideal of work as service, says that she “was happy to take up whatever work was offered or needed to be done at any given time,” and “often taught herself the skills that were needed for a particular job.” B, a young Tamil man who came to Auroville from a local village as an adolescent, advocates community service and insists that making money has never been his primary motive for working. “You do a

good service, money will automatically come,” says he, adding that he often voluntarily did jobs that needed to be done, or even collectively organized voluntary community services such as “Auroville Night Guards” and summer camps for children.

The ideal of Karma Yoga also subverts the sociological understanding of work and social solidarity. While both mechanical and organic solidarity, as defined by Durkheim (1893/1933), is present in Auroville, what really builds the feeling of *communitas* and solidarity is to see, in the words of a survey respondent, “the aspiration, sincere efforts to make the experiment work” (Appendix E). Service-oriented people also earn the respect of the community, for as Ganesh, a casual informant, said, “To me it is clear who should lead Auroville—those people who have worked all these years for the community and not for themselves” (personal communication, November 29, 2007).

Though the Mother stipulated a minimum of five hours of work per day for the community good, there are no collective, centrally organized structures in Auroville to enforce this guideline. This is in direct contrast to other spiritual communes, such as Besahara and Findhorn, which successfully extract a heavy work-load from their members by explicitly relating “the importance of a submissive acceptance to work . . . to the promise of eventual personal transformation” (Abrams & McCullough, 1976, p. 100). In Auroville, the goal and the means of personal transformation are personally determined. Consequently, the number of hours of work one puts in is either individually

decided, or in certain cases decided by the management of that particular work place.

There is no strict *quid pro quo* between the work one does and the remuneration one receives, but as both Kalai and Carol pointed out, commercial or profit-oriented businesses pay better maintenances while service-oriented businesses and administrative working groups pay lower maintenances or none at all. For service-oriented businesses, the ideal of work as a community service runs strong. Denis, a manager of the community store, *Pour Tous*, draws a minimal maintenance of Rs. 4,000, considerably less than other Auroville workers at the same stall, while working 9-10 hours a day, including Sundays. One would be hard pressed to foster such a dedicated attitude through enforced structures (personal communication, July 14, 2007). In comparison, at Brook Farm, labor, as in Auroville, was perceived to be beneficial both to the individual and to the community and was voluntary with the individuals having the freedom to choose their own field of work. The only difference was that at Brook Farm members were obligated to put in a required number of hours per week (sixty during the summer and forty-eight during winter) with the result that, as reported by Spann (1989), Brook Farm members soon lost their enthusiasm for work and consequently for the community.

In a casual conversation over tea one day, Raja, a sculptor friend and fellow Aurovilian, who does routine administrative work at the Solar Kitchen booking and organizing meals, described how when he first started his work, he inwardly revolted at the routine nature of his work, for he had to come to terms

with his own image of himself as a creative artist. “And now,” he said, with his characteristic, enigmatic smile, “I am the Solar Kitchen” (personal communication, June 3, 2007). Upon further questioning it turned out that Raja had not taken up the job because he needed to earn money for a living, but because he deliberately wanted to challenge himself to take up a job that he himself considered to be boring or demeaning. He also clarified that his cryptic statement that he was the Solar Kitchen did not imply a narcissistic, self-importance on his part, but that he did not make the subjective/objective distinctions between himself and his work. “I am there [at the Solar Kitchen], when I am needed. Even on Sundays. I don’t count the hours that I put in, even though I know other Aurovilians do,” he said (personal communication, June 3, 2007).

When work is voluntarily undertaken for the sake of a greater collective good and not for economic incentive or even for personal job satisfaction, one has a completely different attitude towards work, an attitude, I daresay, that can be identified as Buber’s (1970) dialogical notion of an I-Thou relation where both I and Thou are co-created through a mutual encounter. This seemed to be implied in Raja’s description of his work at the Solar Kitchen and was made explicit by an Aurovilian forester who said in the context of managing Auroville’s forests, “I walk through the forests and the land ‘speaks’ to me, and I know what is to be done. I don’t mean that the land actually talks to me . . . I just intuitively know what to plant where” (personal communication, August 12, 2007).

Consciousness, Experimentation, and Collaboration in Work

Other attitudes towards work that similarly suggest a holy I-thou relationship are prevalent in Auroville. Such attitudes contrast sharply with the I-It relationship towards work that one normally finds in work places driven by economic forces. To begin with, part of the spiritual discipline of Integral Yoga is to work consciously, for as the Mother says (Alfassa, 1980, p. 213), it is only through work that one can consciously develop matter and help to transform it. To be conscious about one's work could mean maintaining a certain awareness while working or simply thinking about it deeply before acting. As B says about his work at the Auroville Bakery, "I always know what I am doing. Because sometimes I think after what I do. But many times I know what I am doing. I think three four times before I [do something]."

For A, an architect, one of the biggest inspirations about being in Auroville is the freedom to be able to work in a more holistic way—not to be driven by the goal but to have the possibility to experiment with the process itself:

What I liked about Auroville was the possibility of working as an architect in a more profound way . . . Outside . . . it's such a straitjacket. You are strapped by monetary considerations all around—insurance policies and the like. But here one can decide on the process of how one goes about to create a building. It's much more than just designing. . . . As an architect now, I really need to be connected in more profound ways to all of life. I can't just sit and make sketches of buildings without a deeper understanding of what is seeking to be manifested in the whole bigger picture.

Speaking about a particular building that he helped construct, A says that right from the outset it was an experimental group process, where for a long period of four months, he and his co-architect simply presented sets of drawings

to their client, the community of Verité, till all were satisfied with the vision of the building. That moment of acceptance, as described by A, had the elements of an epiphany:

The day we presented it [the last set of architectural drawings] to the Verité community, we knew that it was our last attempt. If they hadn't accepted it, we would have backed out. As it happened, even before Kathryn turned the paper over to look at the drawing, she knew that that was it [that the drawing would meet with the approval of the community]. It was a very profound experience.

And while A admits that this experimental process, where the design kept evolving even at the stage of construction, had significant cost-overruns, for him it validated his belief that a conscious, collaborative process results in a superior product.

This belief in the potential of group work has led A to be an active part of a group called the Dreamcatchers, a group with open membership, that seeks, through certain processes, to collaboratively work towards building the city with the belief that each individual has a unique contribution to offer. The idea, explains A, is “to create from the group’s highest wisdom instead of creating from the lowest common denominator.” Work, in this context, is not just about putting individual consciousness into matter, but making the more difficult effort to foster a group consciousness by completely surrendering one’s own egoistic preferences in order to co-create something.

Kalai, a Tamil Aurovilian, similarly recognizes the power of group creation. Upset at the current racial division in Auroville, which she perceives as a power-struggle, she emphatically states that in the working groups, “everybody should be there. Not only foreigners, Tamils. If both are there, different ideas will

come . . . we have to think, ‘Which is good for all of us?’ Then we should decide on that base.”

For many Aurovilians there is a transpersonal element to one’s work—the belief in Mother’s force guiding them in their work. B, while explaining how he tackles problems in his work, insists, “To me definitely some force [of the Mother] will be with everyone. How they use it, how they take, how they receive it, how they ask for it, that’s what matters. How they utilize it you know.” Many Aurovilians, particularly A and B among my interviewees, stated that given the challenging socio-environmental conditions and circumstances, it would never have been possible for Auroville to develop as much as it has without being aided by a Divine force.

Distinctions Between Manual Labor and Management

Another way in which some Aurovilians subvert class distinctions prevalent in the normal economic arena is by blurring the distinction between managerial work and manual labor.^{xlii} B talks about how he resisted being chosen as an executive of the Auroville Bakery because he did not like the distinctions made between managers and laborers. He told the person who nominated him that no matter what his position, he would continue to work the way he is used to: “I will do the same thing. It’s not that if I am executive I will wear pant, suit and tie . . . I will be working with the people, in my shorts, sweating, kneading the dough.” The only difference, presumably because of his greater responsibility, is that now he puts in more hours. This is in keeping with the Aurovilian ideal that “in the general organization intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority will find

expression not in the enhancement of the pleasures and the powers of life but in the increase of duties and responsibilities” (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94).

Shadow Issues and Challenges in Work

Compared to the selfishness, competition and strife prevalent in work places in mainstream society, work in Auroville is envisaged and often practiced in idealistic ways in terms of it being experimental, collaborative, conscious, and service-oriented. Yet, this is not to say that all Aurovilians have or can even afford to have such attitudes to work. Many, despite the ideal, do have to work for their livelihood. People serving in important working groups in Auroville are often Western Aurovilians with private sources of income who do not really need the paltry maintenance that is offered (if any is offered at all) in these service-oriented places. Race and class are factors here as in mainstream society, and marginalized groups equally contest for the right of equality in treatment. This was evident from the following remarks by four respondents that I garnered during a discussion with a group of Tamil women:

They [Western Aurovilians] want to keep us [Tamil women] down. The foreigners all like the management jobs, but they don't want us to learn and progress. They just want us to do routine work like cleaning. In the beginning, it was different, we all worked together, and I learnt so many things. Now, if I want to learn how to use the computer, they say, “you can't do that.” If I want to learn something new, it should be encouraged.

Even though we are all Aurovilians, we are not treated equally. They try to control us. To check and re-check our work. They don't believe us. But if a Westerner makes mistakes, they forgive that.

They only like us when we smile and do our work quietly. If we are open in speaking up our minds, they don't like that.

I told her [a Western Aurovilian in a managerial position] that I too was an Aurovilian and she had no right to question the decisions I took about my

work. She takes leave when she needs to, so why shouldn't I? (Appendix F)

Profitable commercial units in Auroville represent a collective shadow issue, for in their drive for better profits, in their dependency on a cheap, locally available labor pool and their hierarchical structure, they do not significantly differ in their practices from businesses in mainstream society. Auroville has a fairly large business sector comprising approximately 150 commercial units that manufacture a wide variety of goods from ceramics and clothes to incense and handicrafts. A few of these units, catering to an export market, are highly successful financially. Even though these larger, export-oriented commercial units are committed to the ideals of beauty, quality and creativity in their products and the managers of these units are remarkable, autodidactic entrepreneurs, profit is the underlying motive of their production. With work output and efficiency at stake, these Aurovilians cannot afford to be as experimental and as idealistic as A, the architect, is in his work. These units have a clear hierarchical structure, and Aurovilians working in such units are expected to respect that as well put in the mandatory eight hours a day instead of having a flexible schedule (as many Aurovilians do) that allows one to combine work with other personal activities. Even though these commercial units donate a significant portion of their profits (usually one-third) to the community, the heads and managers of these units often clearly enjoy a better standard of living than most other Aurovilians, creating a division between the haves and the have-nots as elsewhere in the outside world. Kalai struggles with the issue of whether or not she should leave her work at Financial Service, a service unit, to take up a better-paid job at a business unit.

Contrary to my observations, she believes that she would have more flexibility in her time schedule than she currently enjoys with the strict, demanding hours of the Financial Service. Carol similarly questions the fact that Aurovilians working for service units are paid less, when she feels that their dedication and commitment to work is as high as those Aurovilians employed in business units. It can be mentioned here that for both Carol and Kalai, their colleagues' dedication to their work serves as a source of inspiration. Emphasizing that her colleague Otto's selfless attitude and dedicated service to Auroville has been a motivating factor for her to continue in her work, Kalai says, "If it was not for Otto, I would just walk out from there because it [the money] is not enough."

In a comparative study, Francis (1992) notes, "In the two communities that do not distribute wages equally, Auroville and Saettedamen, there seem to exist comparatively higher levels of interpersonal alienation" (p. 467). While there is some truth in Francis' observation, I would like to point out, with Kalai's relationship to Otto being an example, that this feeling of interpersonal alienation is largely or even totally mitigated when there is inspiring leadership or partnership at the work place.

What remains true, however, is a general alienation between business units and service units in Auroville. Significantly, despite the amount of money that they have contributed to Auroville, no business managers were nominated in the survey as people having made a significant contribution to Auroville. The community clearly appreciates an attitude of service towards work more than success in business. Voicing his/her resentment against profit-making commercial

units, a survey respondent categorically stated: “Everybody should work for Auroville. None of us should start their own business” (Appendix F).

As a stark counterpoint to successful business unit-holders who lead comfortable lives, a significant number of Aurovilians live on a hand-to-mouth basis on the maintenance allotted to them by the community for their voluntary work. This maintenance, as one anonymous survey respondent and a few Tamil Aurovilians pointed out, is clearly insufficient, especially as both Auroville and India become increasingly expensive. The situation directly contradicts Auroville’s ideal that the basic needs of all should be met. A visitor, who had spent almost a year in Auroville, once remarked to me how Aurovilians constantly complain about the lack of money despite the community’s ideal of “no money.” Not feeling supported either in terms of cash or kind is clearly a shadow on the collective psyche of Auroville.

Other shadow issues in the arena of work have to do with one’s own personal growth. Even though Aurovilians aspire for a different life, it is not an easy process to keep one’s sincerity and aspiration alive at all times. Human beings are a complex amalgam of desires arising from different parts of their being. And as Ram Dass (1993), in his visit to Auroville, pointed out, “the attempt to surrender the ego through the choice of the ego . . . is a profound but difficult path, because the toxicity of the market-place is very high” (p. 12). The toxicity of the market-place manifests itself when Aurovilians, in direct contradiction to the ideals, covet the power and position of important administrative jobs even while espousing high altruistic values, as D, one of my interviewees, points out.

Transitions in Auroville Society

With the growth of Auroville over the decades, both in terms of infrastructure and in terms of population, there has been a change in its social structure, akin to the development of an industrialized society from an agricultural one. In the early years land restoration and environmental regeneration was a fundamental necessity. The pioneering Aurovilians, as they were so called, were engaged in land work and of necessity had to have the capability to manage a wide variety of generalized tasks. For instance, D, reminiscing how he was left alone to manage work at an early greenbelt settlement while the former steward went abroad, said that he had received no training whatsoever from his predecessor, and yet he figured it out “for it wasn’t exactly rocket science.” With greater economic sharing than exists at present, and a simple lifestyle (simple by the very fact that luxuries were just not available), there seems to have been a greater mechanical solidarity in those days. As knowledge, skills and resources were limited, such as those required to put up a windmill, build a thatched hut or sink a well, there was a greater interdependence in the community. This interdependence for basic survival promoted organic solidarity. While there will always be an agricultural sector in the Auroville economy, because Auroville’s town-plan envisages a buffer zone of farms and forests around the city-area, over the years Auroville has developed to allow for a number of other activities besides working on the land.

A different economic system that allowed for the exchange of goods and services without the use of money as a medium also promoted the sense of

solidarity and community in the early days. Kalai vividly and joyously recounts the spirit of community in those years when she and her family had all their needs met. They got their groceries, clothes, school supplies and so forth in kind, and in exchange, her parents who farmed the land would deliver all of their produce to the community kitchen. Missing the community spirit of the pioneering days, she adds how as a kid she always felt welcomed and was fed wherever she went in Auroville, while today, in contrast, she feels that one cannot get a meal without paying for it, and that Aurovilians resent it, “if you drop in unannounced at meal times.” Now, she says, “you go more and more into it individually. You grow individually than community-wise.” But in this transition from an exchange-based society to a monetary society she feels financially unsupported and struggles to meet the needs of her family, particularly her children, with the money she earns.

As Auroville develops, the age structure of its society grows more complex, encompassing at present three generations of Aurovilians. With the first generation of Auroville-born children attaining Aurovilian status, Auroville acquired a two-generation status, and as the first generation of pioneering Aurovilians grow older and the children of the second generation are born, it acquires a three-generation status. Such demographic changes result in the emergence of age groups with special needs—children, adolescents, and the aged, and, the service sector of the Auroville economy expands to cater to these needs.

The growth of the service sector, and the corresponding development in infrastructure, in turn attracts a mixed generational group of outsiders who want to join Auroville. While there are no records to mark such demographic shifts

over the years, it is a commonly accepted fact that the pioneering generation of Aurovilians was primarily comprised of young adults, while today more families, often with young children, move into Auroville. As was mentioned to me by quite a few Auroville greenbelters, there are few Newcomers today who choose to work on the land; the hardy independence and self-reliance that characterized the pioneering generation of Aurovilians seems to be largely absent in the current breed of Newcomers. Raja, who once worked in the service-oriented Auroville Guard, mentioned to me how he was woken up one night by a Newcomer woman who wanted him to come out to remove a snake that had entered the house (snakes entering houses is a fairly common occurrence in Auroville). “And she was not alone! Her husband and son were also in the house with her,” Raja reported in amused indignation at what he thought was an absurd request (personal communication, September 19, 2007). Such incidents highlight the erosion of mechanical social solidarity in Auroville, as there is a growing divide between old-timers and Newcomers.

The complexity of Auroville’s society is also marked by the substantial increase of hired labor in recent years. Despite Mother’s injunctions to the contrary, hired labor has become the norm rather than the exception, with an estimated 5,000 people coming in from the neighboring areas to work in Auroville every day. While on the one hand, hiring cheap manual labor from outside has allowed Auroville to expand rapidly, in terms of physical infrastructure and economic production, it has opened up a new set of interpersonal challenges between Aurovilians and hired employees, who are an

inherent part of the Auroville society and economy and yet not part of the Auroville community. Some outside employees in administrative or managerial jobs, presumably because of their fixed hours and greater work output, command better salaries than are paid to Aurovilians themselves. This creates resentment especially if, as pointed out by a few Tamil women, a person is hired from the outside in preference to an Aurovilian.

Durkheim (1893/1933) notes that a complex and highly differentiated society results in a pathological ‘anomic’ division of labor, where there is a loss of social solidarity as the norms binding the economic activities of individuals are weakened. This loss of social solidarity seems to be an unavoidable fact of capitalization and modernization. Despite its ideals of self-sufficiency, Auroville’s economic base is inextricably linked to the regional, national and global economy. India’s growing participation in the globalized market has ensured a wide variety of consumption goods for those who can afford them leading to widely different standards of living in Auroville than ever before, and an ensuing loss of shared wealth and social solidarity. A couple of survey respondents stated, “Not too much is shared in my opinion” and that there is “Not much collective living” (Appendix F).

Due to economic globalization there is an ever-increasing flux of relatively affluent Western tourists into Auroville, and sectors of Auroville’s economy have started catering to this lucrative tourist market rather than the needs of the Aurovilians. With money driving the economy there is an inevitable loss of the attitude of service. An Aurovilian electrician, who once did me an

exceptional favor by coming out at night to replace a worn-out fuse, mentioned, both in sadness and frustration, how he no longer offers his work as a service: “it is just not appreciated anymore . . . people take you for granted just because they can pay you” (personal communication, August 30, 2007). Charles, too, concurs that it was the lack of appreciation from the community, or even more so the feeling of being taken for granted, that led him to close down the carpentry unit that he was previously operating as a service to the community (personal communication, September 15, 2007). On a related issue, Kalai feels people who have joined as Aurovilians only recently are more selfish in their attitude and would not donate anything to Auroville if they could avoid it. She also remarks feeling irritated when she hears such people talking about community, for “they don’t even have the feeling because they don’t know what it was like before.”

All these inter-related factors lead to a loss of organic solidarity and increasing alienation of the individual in present-day Auroville. I would like to note here that while Durkheim (1893/1933) noted that with the breakdown of solidarity, societies could get pathological, he did not analyze the processes by which this happens. From the examples cited here, it would seem that the pathological condition of anomie and alienation starts with the breakdown of interpersonal relationships, with the individual not feeling appreciated by others.

Contrasting the religious utopias studied by Kanter (1972) with the secular communes that formed the basis of their study, Abrams and McCullough (1976) point out that the latter are characterized by social solidarity rather than *communitas* and commitment mechanisms. In my study I find Auroville to be

simultaneously both a modernized society and a spiritual community. While there is a growing sense of alienation of the individual in the larger society of Auroville, within this larger society there are smaller groupings of people and friends with a shared history who are bonded both by social solidarity derived out of economic factors and an affective *communitas* born out of shared ideology. Both part of mainstream society and outside of it, Auroville is maddeningly complex in its social structure, and it escapes easy definitions as its social psychology simultaneously embraces a wide range of seemingly contradictory attitudes.

Social Psychology

So far I have explored the dialectic of the individual and the social by examining how social conditions in Auroville foster commitment, liminality, *communitas* and solidarity among individuals. Here I review basic perspectives from mainstream schools of social psychology by focusing on aspects of *personal identity* of Aurovilians, and *social identity* of groups within Auroville. Following J. C. Turner (1982), I use the term personal identity to refer to specific defining characteristics of self-identity, such as feelings of competence, of adaptation, happiness and so on, which are more personal by nature as opposed to social categories of race, class, gender, age, and wealth. Given my socio-psychological interest in analyzing how the individual is shaped by the larger collective entity of Auroville, I focus on only those aspects of personal identity that are somehow triggered by the individual's participation in Auroville. Social identity in this study uses Tajfel's (1982) definition, "as that *part* (emphasis in original) of the

individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 2).

The two most influential schools of social psychology—the European school of social representations popularized by Moscovici (2000) and the American school of symbolic interactionism founded by Blumer (1969)—both view individual reality and meaning as being largely socially determined.

Social representation is a collectively determined system of values, ideas and practices that prescribes codes for behavior and communication for individuals within a given society. In any society, knowledge is consensually and often unconsciously reformulated and distorted as it is circulated in the public domain. Moscovici's (1963) original work comparing the circulation of ideas in communist, catholic and urban societies concluded that knowledge in communist societies was circulated mainly through *propaganda*, in Catholic societies through *propagation*, and in an urban-liberal milieu through *diffusion* where the purpose of communication was mainly to inform people.

Symbolic interactionism seeks to understand how individuals construct their reality through their interactions with others. Blumer (1969), who coined the term symbolic interactionism, assumes that all meaning is derived from social interaction and is modified through an interpretive process by the individual. This branch of social psychology, as its name suggests, emphasizes the fact that human beings live not just in a physical environment, but also in a symbolic environment of language and actions. Thus, social psychologists who subscribe to this school

are engaged in interpreting the symbolic actions of the participant-actors, and this process of interpretation is seen as a research methodology (Jacob, 1987). As detailed in Chapter 3, by choosing to do basic interpretive qualitative research I opt to merely describe the social psychology of Auroville rather than view the words and actions of my participants as interpretable signs or semiotic symbols. Also, taking a transpersonal view of reality and the nature of the human being, I disagree with Blumer that meaning is solely derived from social interactions. Transpersonal experiences, in my opinion, also give meaning and coherence to the individual self.

In reviewing the work of both Moscovici (1973) and Blumer (1969) I would like to point out that the construction of knowledge and reality in social interaction depends directly on the type of social institution and the degree of freedom granted to, or appropriated by, the individual within the institution. While it could be argued, from a postmodernist viewpoint, that all relationships are socially constructed, what varies from society to society is the degree of individual agency, participation, and resistance to the social production of knowledge. In a collectively organized and controlled society (for example, the communist society) knowledge circulates as propaganda, whereas in a contemporary urban-liberal milieu, particularly in the information age, knowledge is largely transparent and participatory, being constructed by individual agents. Additionally, as most group psychologists agree (see Reicher, 1982; Tajfel, 1974), there has been a general development of human society from centrally organized and communal tribal societies where individual identity is subjugated to the group

identity, to democratic societies where individual participation and agency is honored. Ironically, however, the economic forces of capitalism have largely usurped democracy. Macpherson (1962) notes that capitalistic societies enmesh individuals in “self-interested contractual relations with others” robbing them of their essential humanity and self-possession (p. 275). In contrast, secular intentional communities intentionally allow for the growth and development of the individual (Abrams & McCullough, 1976), and therefore in the enactment of the social psychology of the community individuals play a greater role than they would in urban-liberal mainstream societies.

As has already been noted, the spiritual philosophy of Auroville grants immense freedom to individuals by encouraging them to be free of all social conditioning (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200); thus, to a considerable extent, within the community of Auroville, knowledge, meaning and reality are not so much socially constructed as personally and subjectively determined.^{xliii}

Aspects of Personal Identity in Auroville

My research specifically indicates that Auroville allows its residents the freedom to explore their personal identity to a greater extent than would have been possible in the societies and cultures they originally came from.^{xliv} 12 Tamil Aurovilian women with whom I talked mentioned that Auroville gave them a greater degree of freedom and independence than would have been possible in their native rural culture: “We can express ourselves more freely here—wear whatever clothes we please, talk openly with others including men, and speak out

our minds” (Appendix E). Kalai, a Tamil interviewee, notes with obvious pride that her children are “real Aurovilians” who “think in a different way.”

Paradoxically, despite the “village character” and tendency to “gossip” (Appendix F), there is a surprising degree of tolerance in Auroville. “Here, I feel free to experiment for no one minds if I make mistakes,” said one Aurovilian woman who had been in Auroville for just two years (personal communication, September 7, 2007). Another participant wrote, “I like the fact that it [Auroville] allows the possibility to do just about anything that I can conceive of” (Appendix E). Also, though they were not the main focus of my study, children seem to feel and relish this sense of freedom. A young Aurovilian who was brought up in Auroville wrote, “I love the freedom I had growing up” (Appendix E). A friend of mine mentioned how when she was contemplating relocating back to the Bay Area of California, her nine-year old daughter rejected the idea saying that Auroville was the only place where she could be herself. All in all, while some Aurovilians mentioned the sense of adventure, experimentation and opportunities inherent in the Auroville experiment as inspirational, an overwhelming majority of them declared freedom and the opportunity for growth to be what they liked most about Auroville.

As Durkheim (1893/1933) points out, institutions contradict individual choice by constraining the freedom of the individual. What Abrams and McCullough (1976) observe about successful secular communes is true of Auroville as well:

A successful secular commune would . . . [overcome the constraint of the institution] by refusing to treat the communal institution as an institution

at all, at least in its internal social relationships, that is, by establishing a social practice in which the institution was continuously represented as a project of its individuals. (p. 167)

To illustrate the way in which Auroville is “continuously represented as a project of its individuals,” I would like to cite an exchange on the online forum *AV Net* wherein Cristo wrote about the need of Auroville establishing better economic policies, and Juergen Kissmann reminded him that “Auroville is you” (personal communication, August 28, 2008). By redefining social institutions as oneself, one effectively blurs the distinctions between the objective and the subjective. In this context I concur fully with Abrams and McCullough that the dialectic of the individual and the society can be meaningfully sustained in a mutually enhancing relationship only by exercising one’s personal autonomy.

Aspects of Social Identity in Auroville

Until fairly recently mainstream social psychology did not focus on intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1982). In Europe, Tajfel and J. C. Turner popularized social identity theory as a means to understand the psychological and sociological aspects of group behavior (see Tajfel & J. C. Turner, 1986). Social identity theory seeks to describe the processes by which individuals identify themselves as a social group that adopts shared attitudes and behavior-patterns to outsiders. In his delineation of group identity, Tajfel (1974) differentiates between those elements of self-identity derived from individual personality traits and interpersonal relationships (personal identity) and those elements derived from belonging to a particular group (social identity). Individuals have access to a repertoire of identities, both social and personal, which inform them who they are and what

any particular identity might entail. Depending on the social context one or other of these identities is adopted by the individual. Tajfel postulates that social behavior exists on a continuum from the purely interpersonal to the purely intergroup. Where personal identity is paramount, social interactions are largely marked by interpersonal behavior. At the other end of the spectrum, social identity completely dominates over personal identity in self-conception, and individuals act in accordance with the group behavior and not from their individual capacity.

This social psychological theory is particularly relevant in the Auroville context. Given the size, complexity, and emphasis on individuality, Aurovilians themselves do not easily cohere as a single group with a strong shared social identity. Within Auroville, however, given its heterogeneous composition, there are smaller groupings primarily based around language and culture. Most of these groupings are no more than casual social gatherings, such as the British table at the Solar Kitchen, the German video nights, the Russian gatherings, the American Thanksgiving party or the North Indian Diwalī celebration, where social identity, though prevalent, is not paramount. A social group exists only in relation to other groups: “the characteristics of one’s own group (such as its status, its richness or poverty, the color of its skin) acquire their significance only in relation to the perceived differences from other groups and the evaluation of those differences” (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). In that sense, there are two major social groups in Auroville that are diametrically opposed to each other in terms of social and economic

power, education and color of skin, and these are the Western Aurovilians and the Tamil Aurovilians.^{xlv}

Since the passing away of the Mother, Auroville's governing organizations have largely been dominated by Western Aurovilians. Starting in 2001, however, there has been a marked social movement in Auroville where local Tamil men (and to a lesser extent, women) have come forward to participate in the governance of Auroville. What was unusual about the process was that the Tamil Aurovilians acted as part of a group and not in their individual capacities. There were charges against them in the general meetings that they were manipulating the election process by submitting signed blank ballots to their group leaders and letting them elect people on their behalf (Selvaraj, 2007). Because of the sheer numbers in their population, Tamil Aurovilians now wield a significant influence in the political processes in Auroville.

Such social behavior where an individual instead of acting as a unique, differentiated personality acts as an interchangeable representative of a group is of psychological significance in social identity theory (Sherif, 1966; J. C. Turner, 1982). To a certain extent, this phenomenon of Tamil Aurovilians acting as an undifferentiated group can be culturally understood: Unlike the assertion of individuality in Western cultures, rural Indian culture is communal by nature with elders and leaders enjoying unprecedented authority. Deschamps (1982), however, analyzing intergroup relations in the wider social context in which they occur, points out that power plays an operative role in such cases. Distinguishing between "dominant" and "dominated" groups, Deschamps shows how

individuality itself is a function of power: Members of dominating groups, at the centre of a social system, “see themselves above all as individualized human beings who are singular . . . voluntary actors, free and autonomous” (p. 90). Western Aurovilians, though categorized as a group by outsiders, perceive themselves as autonomously acting individuals and not as a group. They do not need to think of themselves in terms of their social affiliation because of the social power they enjoy. Individuality, then, is not just a function of personal development, where people differentiate themselves from their social group, but is also a function of social and economic power. This social psychological perspective is particularly pertinent in the Auroville context where, given the goal of being free from one’s social and cultural conditioning, individuality can easily be assumed to be solely a function of personal spiritual development. Researching intergroup relations is not the main aim of my study, nor is my methodology specifically designed to study the issue, but even to a casual observer of social psychology in Auroville, this much is readily apparent: Western Aurovilians, because of the privileges of their education, professional skills and greater economic resources have so far dominated and continue to dominate social and economic processes; and in reaction to this, Tamil Aurovilians have started contesting that power deriving their strength by subscribing to a common group identity.

It needs to be mentioned that the term “Tamil Aurovilian” is somewhat as a misnomer, because it is socially understood to specifically refer to local Tamil Aurovilians and not the entire Tamil population in Auroville. There are Tamil

Aurovilians who clearly distance themselves from being seen as part of a group and who take pride in the growth of their individuality. Kalai, a local Tamil Aurovilian woman who was brought up in Auroville, is against the formation of Tamil women's groups—a current phenomenon, arguing that a women's group in Auroville should include everybody and not just women from one race.

I view the development of an individual from a socialized being to a fully individuated transpersonal being as an evolutionary process, but I recognize that in Auroville, even though this is the stated aim, not all members or sections of the society are at the same stage of development. Individual and social development in Auroville, particularly given its heterogeneous character in bringing together people from different cultural, educational and economic backgrounds, is a convoluted, messy affair. What is remarkable, and what will be explored further in Chapter 6, is the fact that Auroville, by virtue of its transpersonal ideals, encourages such development.

CHAPTER 6: THE EMERGENCE OF A SPIRITUAL SOCIETY

Scholars of religious studies have recorded an exponential growth in religion and spirituality in both North America and Europe in recent years. This phenomenon, described as a “second axial period” (Cousins, 1996, p. 7), expresses itself in an upsurge of new religious movements (Saliba, 2003) as well as personal practices that do not occur in the context of religious institutions (Forman, 2004). Russell (1995) talks about the emergence of a *consciousness age* pointing out that currently there is not only a growing interest in spirituality, but also a change from materialistic values to personal values that privilege ecology and community.^{xlvi} Forman, who best documents the growth of religiosity and spirituality in USA, states that “59% of the Americans in 2001 described themselves as both religious and spiritual” (p. 3) and observes that this spiritual resurgence is rooted in the lived experience of the individual. Similarly, Ferrer and Sherman (2008) remark that there seems to be a genuine need for “deeply lived religion rather than a simply confessed or routinely performed religiosity” (p. 16).

Sociologically this move is understood as a shift from a pre-modern society marked by an all-pervasive religious culture, where religious organizations control all sociological institutions, to a postmodern, differentiated society, where religion, no longer the source of all social functions, becomes a matter of personal faith and self-aware commitment (Sommerville, 1998; Aldridge, 2000). Griffin (1988) and Wilber (1995, 2000a) hail this subjective turn in religion as the beginning of a constructive or integral postmodernism that

creatively synthesizes the values of modernism and pre-modernism. Wexler (2000) chides mainstream sociology, “in its complacent insularity with tired debates about postmodern culture,” for not grasping the full import of this social phenomenon (p. 3). While it is difficult to say something definitive about this social change without more empirical studies on the subject, it could well be that this turn towards spirituality marks a psychological change in capitalistic societies where individuals, perhaps to counter the relativism and alienation in a postmodern culture, seek to invest their lives with a deeper spiritual meaning.

Wexler (2000) terms this emerging new society, beyond the postmodern society with its preoccupations of culture, language and identity, as the “mystical society” (p. 1). Forman’s (2004) work, however, shows that *mysticism* and related cognate words are not in use in common parlance. In consonance with lay usage, I prefer to use the term spiritual as opposed to mystical. I also feel that the latter term, unlike the former, is suggestive of occult and transcendental phenomena. To me, spirituality is rooted both in mystical or transpersonal experiences and in our daily sensory experiences. In Chapter 4, I had distinguished spiritual from religious behavior by suggesting that the former was marked by greater individual autonomy in the choice of beliefs and practices. Here I would further like to define spirituality, as Tillich (1955) and Griffin (1988) do, as our ultimate concerns and values about life, whether these concerns posit a transcendental, otherworldly reality or are about commonplace, everyday life. As I understand it, spirituality does not arbitrarily divide the sacred from the mundane, but imbues worldly concerns such as power, wealth, sexuality and success with holiness.

Further, in accordance with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's philosophy, I see the spirit—at once, transcendent, immanent and personal—as an evolutionary drive pulsating through the whole universe. In this wider sense, spirituality, as Forman and Griffin also conclude, is panentheistic or simultaneously transcendent and immanent. In the narrower realm of human practices, however, I believe spirituality implies a deliberate choice as to how one conducts one's life. Spirituality is a consciously adopted attitude towards life that seeks to be in resonance with the working of the spirit within and without and is not just about adopting certain practices, such as yoga or meditation. In this context, I differ from Griffin who postulates: “everybody embodies a spirituality” (p. 1). However, I agree with him that contemporary spirituality, as also seen in Auroville, has an immanent quality to it. This means spirituality is regarded as the general mode of being in everyday life and not something to be practiced only at specific times and places.

In this chapter, I first review theoretical constructs about the general evolution of societies and the evolution of religion/spirituality within societies in accordance with Bellah's (1970) injunction that social evolution and religious evolution go hand in hand. Secondly, contrasting primarily Wilber's (1995) views with those of Sri Aurobindo's (Ghose, 1972a), I raise the question of our conscious participation, individually and collectively, in humanity's evolution towards spiritual societies. In reviewing these theories, I pay particular attention to general evolutionary processes, as determined by systems theory. Finally, I examine Auroville as an expression of a postsecular spiritual society in the light

of my data and existing literature in this field. I draw the conclusion that embedded into its very ideals, and occasionally manifested in its socio-psychological dynamics, Auroville exhibits certain salient characteristics of the evolutionary process and therefore has the potential to allow for the emergence of a spiritual society.

Review of Social Evolutionary Theories

In his examination of evolution and the human phenomenon, the Christian mystic and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1955/1999) notes, “the social phenomenon is not the attenuation, but the culmination of the biological phenomenon” (p. 155). The systems thinker Laszlo (1987) similarly opines that “the leading edge of human evolution is no longer genetic, it is sociocultural” (p. 4). Societies follow the same general trends of evolution as seen in other complex systems in physical and biological sciences, namely self-organization and random fluctuations that arise out of the complexity eventually leading to the emergence of new structures. But, apart from these general tendencies, the principles of organization and evolution are understood by specific sets of theories in each of these disciplines, that is, physics, biology and sociology. Physics, biology and sociology pertain respectively to the temporal unfolding of matter, life and mind in the universe. While matter and life date back to billions of years ago, the organization of human beings into socio-cultural systems “must be measured in tens of thousands of years” (Laszlo, p. 54). As it is a relatively recent phenomenon, the study of human societies from an evolutionary perspective is still fairly new, but given Sri Aurobindo’s evolutionary philosophy, I find it to be

a valuable perspective with which to view the socio-psychological dynamics of Auroville.

The contemporary global society can be seen as the outcome of evolutionary processes that are at work in society. Society is a complex system that emerges from human interactions and relations within a group (Laszlo, 1987). Laszlo clarifies that while rules and regulations are consciously maintained in any society by governing institutions, there is a general self-organizing tendency of societies to move towards a higher level of organization in ways that cannot be fully planned and controlled by the governing institutions: “As the flows of people, information, energy and goods intensify, they transcend the boundaries of the social system” (p. 90). In other words, the intensification of the flows of people, information, energy and goods in a global market create unpredictable, random fluctuations that have a much bigger effect on participating nation-states, economically and culturally, than was consciously planned. Profit-driven capitalism and economic globalization, without explicitly seeking to do so, are creating a globalized society and culture that transcends the barriers of participating nation-states.^{xlvii} This unplanned emergence of a global society, which is more complex in its organization than a nation-state, is marked by the differentiation of the distinct, participating nation states and their cultural and economic interconnections.

Technology^{xlviii} is widely regarded by social scientists, such as Laszlo (1987), Wilber (2000a) and Lenksi (1970), as the motor that drives the evolutionary process in societies in that technology catalyzes structural and

institutional changes. Over the last 30,000 years society is regarded to have evolved from hunter-gatherers to pastoral to agricultural to industrial and postindustrial systems where the dominant use of a particular technology and its contribution to economic wealth defines the system.^{xlix} Contemporary India, for instance, is at once an agricultural, industrial and postindustrial or informational society, but its current and predicted economic growth is due to its successful participation in information technology in a globalized market. As Russell (1995) points out, due to the accelerated rate of technological innovations, particularly the speed of information exchange since industrialization, it takes a much shorter time for nation-states to move through the stages of social evolution. In other words, the pace at which developing nations are moving into the information age is much faster than it was for the West. Teilhard de Chardin makes the interesting point that globalization and the population explosion (and one may add, the contemporary information age) have made the world a smaller place today, which accounts for the sudden acceleration in the pace of social evolution today, where humanity is drawn “together in a single whole” (1955/1999, p. 172). While lamenting the environmental crisis brought about by the increased use of technology, Laszlo and Russell point out that evolutionary leaps resulting in the emergence of new forms have always been preceded by large-scale environmental changes.

Technology undoubtedly acts as a catalyst of social change, but it would be too reductionist a view of the human being to regard this interobjective dimension of life to be the sole, or even the primary, agent of evolution. The

human being is the first species that because of the prowess of the mind and its capacity for self-reflection is not totally determined by the material conditions of the environment. The prowess of the self-reflexive mind allows human beings to consciously participate in the evolutionary process. While, as Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971) notes, individuals can access high levels of consciousness through the sheer dint of their effort, it requires the collective participation of a group to effect social change. Eric Jantsch (1980), a noted systems thinker, detailing the working of the human mind, similarly believes that society is shaped by our ideas and values even more than technology and the environment:

The self-reflexive mind not only relates the whole world to the individual, it also relates the individual to the whole world. From now on, everyone of us assumes *responsibility* [emphasis in original] for the macrosystem. Not only for our societal systems but also for the whole planet with its ecological order . . . (p. 177)

In examining the evolutionary process of the self-reflexive mind, Jantsch notes that its ideas and values are less constrained by material structures and can hence accelerate evolution. The freedom of the self-reflexive mind, as Jantsch further points out, is also reflected in the fact that there are practically no limits to the formation of new neural communication channels in the human brain. Finally, Jantsch draws our attention to the fact that currently electronic communication parallels the speed of neural communication and results in “novel information structures” (p. 165). Building on these ideas, Russell believes that the information age is being overtaken by a “Consciousness Age . . . [where] the development of consciousness could well become the dominant human activity over much of the planet within the next century” (1995, p. 256). Drawing on documentation of

studies on the effects of mystical phenomena like group meditation or *darshan* Russell makes the additional, interesting point that the consciousness age could come about more rapidly given the growing evidence that a change in consciousness can be effected instantaneously and contagiously.

Akin to Russell (1995), most religious scholars and transpersonal thinkers, see the emergence of a spiritual society as a result of the general evolution of society. Even classical sociologists Marx, Weber, and Durkheim implicitly indicated the evolution of religions in the modern era. Contemporary theorists like Bellah and Wilber bring more nuanced perspectives to this evolutionary process identifying various stages of growth of religion and society. Bellah classifies the growth of religion in society into five evolutionary stages—primitive, archaic, historic, early modern, modern—pointing out that the progression from each stage to the next involves the scientific evolutionary process “of increasing differentiation and complexity of organization” (1970, p. 21). In other words, Bellah does not see the rise of spirituality or subjective religiosity in the contemporary world as a regression into earlier archaic, undifferentiated religious societies. According to Bellah, contemporary spirituality is marked by an increase in symbolic differentiation, where religious symbols permeate everyday life and yet point towards a transcendent form with the promise of a greater integration. Contemporary religion or spirituality, unlike all other previous historical forms of religion, does not make a sharp dualistic distinction between the physical world of everyday reality and an intangible, transcendent world.

Wilber's (1995, 2000b) evolutionary theory holds that all of existence essentially has a subjective, objective, intersubjective, and interobjective dimension to it and that evolution largely unfolds equally in all these four aspects of life.¹ According to Wilber (1998), the structure of a society is interobjective and organically gives rise to an intersubjective worldview. The objective components of a social system, such as the types of technology, the forces of production and governing institutions, are crucial in determining the intersubjective cultural worldview of that social system. For Wilber (1984, 1995), the evolution of the cultural worldview of society parallels the general development of the individual from birth to a transpersonal adulthood. Wilber (1995) distinguishes between several stages of growth and, synthesizing the work of various thinkers (particularly Habermas, Gebser and Piaget) suggests a variety of synonyms for these stages. In general the evolutionary process, according to Wilber (2000a), proceeds from egocentric or preconventional to ethnocentric or conventional and further to worldcentric or postconventional. The evolutionary process is thus marked by a decrease of egoistic and narcissistic values to embrace increasingly pluralistic and holistic views.

Wilber (1995) believes that, barring occasional differences, the cognitive development of the individual human being (ontogeny) is mirrored by a parallel development of the human society (phylogeny). His socio-cultural evolutionary stages of archaic, magic, mythic, rational and centauric have a correspondence with the development of cognitive states, namely phantasmic-operational (pre-operational), representational mind, concrete operational, formal operational, and

post-formal operational mind (Wilber, 2000a). The centauric stage of socio-cultural evolution is a trans-rational stage marked by aperspectival vision-logic, which views all possible perspectives as an integral whole. Wilber (1995) equates this stage with a nascent planetary culture but cautions that, given the complex, meandering nature of progress, the full emergence of this next evolutionary stage can never be guaranteed.

Though Wilber posits a trans-rational religion phase in society as early as 1983, with the publication of *A Sociable God*, he never really details in any of his writings what a trans-rational and spiritual society would look like and instead collapses his sociable God to an individually-attained, transcendent and non-dualist state of consciousness. In his magnum opus, *Sex, Ecology and Spirituality* (1995), he mentions but again does not elaborate on the nature of an integrative planetary culture with society operating at the cognitive level of vision-logic. In an accompanying footnote in this tome, Wilber promises to deal with this issue of a planetary culture in a subsequent volume, but is yet to do so.

Mirroring Wilber's approach, M. King (2004) sees social evolution as proceeding from presecular to secular and further on to postsecular^{li} societies. M. King views contemporary, democratic societies as being postsecular, arguing that the individual freedom granted under secular democracies has allowed for a pluralistic resurgence of spirituality. M. King contrasts the rejection of the religion in a secular society with the individually-defined spiritual values of the postsecular society. The postsecular era accepts the rejection of authoritarian religion of the secular world, but simultaneously affirms the importance of the

spiritual impulse innate in all. This spiritual impulse is seen as being multifaceted and worthy of nurturing. Emphasizing the importance of this developmental trajectory from secular to postsecular, M. King asserts, “secular rights and freedom of expression are a prerequisite to the renewal of spiritual enquiry” (p. 6). Carefully distinguishing the contemporary expression of spirituality from religious worldviews, M. King holds that institutionalized religions in contemporary societies are archaic remnants from the presecular era and values the spontaneous emergence of spirituality within individuals and groups as opposed to its imposition by religious tradition.

While such evolutionary theories are useful in contrasting contemporary societies with earlier ones and for speculating on the nature and structure of future societies, several points need to be borne in mind in critically reviewing such theories. First of all, as Wuthnow cautions, evolutionary theories are cast in such general terms that “essentially ambiguous data can be readily manipulated to support them” (1992, p. 106). To Wuthnow’s warning I would like to add that these evolutionary theories are mainly formulated by Euro-American writers. More empirical studies of other cultures incorporating emic perspectives need to be conducted to validate these theories.

The inter-relationship of society and religion in the West differs from that in India. In Europe, religion was institutionalized to a much greater degree than it ever was in India. Power was concentrated in a single, central religious authority, that of the Church, which in the pre-modern era had complete control over society. In the pre-modern era, Christianity demanded unquestioned social

allegiance and severely punished individuals, such as Galileo and Bruno, who dared to profess other beliefs. In sharp contrast, Hinduism, recognizing a plurality of spiritual paths to the Divine, encompasses a bewildering array of opposing doctrines, cults, rites and rituals. Hindus distinguish themselves from other religions (or even from other cults within Hinduism) on the basis of ritualistic practices rather than on the basis of doctrinal beliefs.

Additionally, Indian society, much more so than Western society, was hierarchically organized into a caste system based on the division of labor; however, unlike Western society, it recognized and allowed men (and perhaps to a lesser extent, women) the freedom to walk away from social obligations in order to pursue a spiritual life. It also allowed religion to freely develop in a multitude of ways, such as in the formation of new religious groups and sub-sects. Consequently, while in the West the development of science led to the marginalization of religion and its outdated beliefs, in India the religious impulse continues to thrive unabated. India's social and religious history shows that despite the conquests and subsequent incursions of Islam and Christianity into Indian society, Indic religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism—continued to develop by expressing themselves in new forms of worship, such as the *Bhakti* tradition, or in new mystical practices, such as the tantric traditions of the *Saiva siddhas*, the *Nath yogis*, and *Vajrayana* Buddhists, or in new metaphysical formulations, such as *Advaita Vedanta* and *Madhyamika* and *Vijnanavada* Buddhism. The point here is that while Western societies are largely homogenous and organized around techno-economic means of production, Indian

society is far more heterogeneous, complex and religiously diverse. Socio-cultural or psycho-spiritual worldviews in India do not show that neat progression from pre-modern to modern and to post-modern development. Nor has the development of rationality and critical thinking in India resulted in an erosion of religious faith as it has in the West. Unlike contemporary USA, where a sizeable population of Christian fundamentalists find themselves in opposition against rationalistic science, in India, people seem to more easily embrace the allegedly opposing tendencies of faith and reason. Rationality and faith are seen as qualities that arise from different parts of one's being, and one or the other can be fruitfully applied to different situations in life as deemed fit.

It is also arguable how far cognitive development is an accurate measure of spiritual development. Given the Western bias for rationality and cognition, to reduce all spiritual expression to an expression of the development of the mind could be a Euro-centric error. Wilber (1995, 2000a) seems to privilege the mind's way of knowing, while traditionally Indian spiritual thought has recognized all three paths—of *Jnana* or mind, *Bhakti* or heart, and *Karma* or physical work—as being valid paths to the Divine. Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1990) points out, in the course of evolution, human-beings have come to be constituted of different levels of being—physical, emotional, mental—all of which can access the Divine in their own particular way. Similarly Ferrer's (2002) participatory transpersonal psychology holds that there are multiple ways by which one can participate in a transpersonal experience and all of these should be equally honored. Without

specifying the goal of the spiritual quest, it is impossible to judge the efficacy of a particular spiritual path or line of development.

A related issue here is the use of symbols and rituals as aids to further spiritual development. Wilber (1995), perhaps given his cognitive bias, sees any use of symbols and myths as a regression to pre-rational religious stages—that of magic and mythic. Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, recognizes that the infra-rational or sub-conscious parts of the human being, namely the physical and emotional planes, need forms, symbols and rituals “before they can be fully spiritualized, [and] before they can directly feel the Spirit and obey its law” (Ghose, 1971, p. 178). Noting that although Western positivism despises the symbolic rituals of Hinduism as irrational, Sri Aurobindo maintains that there is a place for such rituals in the practice of an integral spirituality, for it is not just the mind but the entire multifaceted nature of the human being that needs to be divinized. Sri Aurobindo derides cognitive reason as being a reliable guide to the Divine:

The European mind . . . insists on ‘purifying’ religion by the reason and not by the spirit on ‘reforming’ it, by the reason and not by the spirit. And we have seen what were the results of this kind of purification and reformation in Europe. The infallible outcome of that ignorant doctoring has been first to impoverish and then slowly to kill religion. (p. 90)

Rather than analyzing economic factors and objective social components such as use of technology, Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971) describes the evolution of society in psycho-spiritual terms. Borrowing the terms of German theorist Karl Lamprecht, Sri Aurobindo sees society as proceeding through symbolic, typical, conventional, individualist and subjective stages. However, he warns that “the

psychology of man and his [sic] society is too complex, too synthetical of many-sided and inter-mixed tendencies to satisfy any such rigorous and formal analysis” (p. 2).

Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971) chiefly differs from other evolutionary thinkers on the issue that the earliest forms of society were necessarily primitive and archaic in their religious formulation. In sharp contrast, Sri Aurobindo points out that the first stage of Indian civilization, the ancient Vedic society, was *symbolic* in that life was ritualistically and symbolically organized in accordance with the highest spiritual truths.^{lii} The symbol in a religious ritual points to hidden and transcendental spiritual forces that are believed to support physical life. Though the masses participate in rituals and the sub-conscious and infra-rational parts of their beings supposedly benefit spiritually from this participation, the occult meaning behind the symbols are often understood only by the initiated—the priests and the Brahmins. The extravagant, allusive images of the Vedas were to Sri Aurobindo symbols of an occult reality that “could hint luminously to the mind what the precise intellectual word, apt only for logical or practical thought or to express the physical and the superficial, could not at all hope to manifest” (Ghose, 1971, p. 8). He (Ghose, 1998b) believes that the Vedas were deliberately written by mystics in a cryptic language to protect the deeper occult meaning of the mantras (hymns) from the ordinary mind. In the symbolic age of society, life is predominantly religious or spiritual and all the facets of life—the psychological, economic, ethical, and physical—are regarded as being sacrosanct,

for “man and the cosmos are both of them symbols and expressions of the same hidden reality” (Ghose, 1971, p. 8).

In the second typical stage one sees the spiritual impulse being dominated by the psychological type, as for instance in the psychological characterization of the Indian caste system, and by the ethical motive of Dharma, which determined the code of life for the individual. The third conventional stage comes about when the outer expression of the ideal is formalized and becomes more important than the ideal itself. This corresponds in Indian society to the caste system being formulated as a rigid, social order rather than a psychological characterization of the individual’s abilities. Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971) hints that it was a similar conventional turn that changed the Christian religion into a religion of ecclesiasticism and monasticism far different from what its founder, Christ, had himself intended. The increasing intolerance of conventionalism is eventually overthrown by an individualistic stage where rationality predominates. Sri Aurobindo notes the differences between India and Europe at this stage, by pointing out that the former society merely produced religious reformers and new spiritual impulses with appropriate cultural and social practices, while European society was marked by the rise of atheism and secularism. In the evolution from an individualistic age to a subjective age Sri Aurobindo speculates on how India and Europe can eventually influence each other: While upholding the democratic rights and the free development of the individual secured by the West as a necessary condition of social evolution, Sri Aurobindo hopes that India, which

has never divorced spirituality from its social and cultural practices, will influence the West in discovering practical and subjective spiritual ideals.

Of the futuristic, subjective stage, Sri Aurobindo says that ideally in this phase the individual would be governed by the deepest impulse of his/her own being, that of the soul. But distinguishing between false and true subjectivism, Sri Aurobindo states:

True subjectivism teaches us,—first, that we are a higher self than our ego or our members, secondly that we are in our life and being not only ourselves but all others our real ‘I’ is a Supreme Being which is our true self and . . . that Being is one in all. (Ghose, 1971, p. 47)

Further, Sri Aurobindo points out that the subjective stage of the social cycle can culminate in a spiritual society only by the radical change of human consciousness into a Divine consciousness. While Sri Aurobindo differs from other evolutionary thinkers concerning the origins of human society and the evolutionary role he accords to a posited Divine force, he concurs with them that society is currently moving from a rational stage to a supra-rational stage, governed increasingly by a spiritual consciousness.

Unlike Wilber, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were explicit about the evolution of the human species resulting in supramental species and about society moving from being organized around economic motives to being organized by a spiritual drive; however, they were reluctant to give definitive details about this next evolutionary cycle citing that the Divine, supramental energy would work things out at its own pace in ways that they could not fully predict. Nevertheless, a broad outline of their vision of a spiritual or supramental life and society can be summed up here: First of all, Sri Aurobindo did not envision a wholesale change

of the human species, but foresaw a gradual process whereby more and more individuals would become supramentalized. He did, however, predict that the operation of the supramental, Divine consciousness would have consequences for all of life on earth:

Sovereign supramental light and force at the head of evolutionary Nature might be expected to have its consequences in the whole evolution. . . . A freer play of intuition and sympathy and understanding would enter into human life, a clearer sense of the truth of self and things and a more enlightened dealing with the opportunities and difficulties of existence. (Ghose, 1972a, p. 968)

Similarly, as has historically been the evolutionary process with the birth of new species, Sri Aurobindo believed that there could be a number of intermediary species before the birth of an immortal supramental species. As for the supramental society, Sri Aurobindo saw it as allowing infinite individual differentiation contained within a spiritual realization of the oneness of all. By its very nature, such a spiritual society would be guided by intuition and based on harmony. There are no conflicts between an individual's interests and society's interests, for the individual self of a supramentalized being is one with the self of all. Sri Aurobindo, most notably, in the collected *Letters of Yoga* (Ghose, 1970) recognizes that individuals by their nature are inclined to different paths that lead to different goals, and yet he indicates that all these differences will be held in a differentiated unity that can only be achieved in a supramentalized world towards which both the individual and society are evolving.

For Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1971), a spiritual society is based not on a theoretical or mental understanding but on the actual spiritual realization of each individual as to the oneness of the whole universe. According to Sri Aurobindo,

two conditions need to be met to effect a spiritual change in society: Firstly there must be a group of individuals who can “recreate themselves in the image of the spirit and communicate both their idea and its power to the mass,” and secondly, there must be a group or society “which is capable of receiving and effectively assimilating the power” (p. 247). Sri Aurobindo points out that these two conditions have never been fully met in the past, which has resulted in the observable phenomenon that while individuals have attained enlightenment or advanced spiritual powers, society itself has never been truly spiritualized. But he believes that, even though the process may take hundreds of years, the spiritualization of society is the unavoidable goal towards which humanity is moving. Sri Aurobindo envisions a society where human beings can be “freely social without society,” exhibiting “an enlightened, intuitive spontaneity of free and fluid association” (p. 291).

Furthering Social Evolution

Accepting social evolution as a fact, social evolutionary theories predicting a spiritual future lead us to ask other questions: First, what can one do, individually, collectively and institutionally to further social evolution? And secondly, is the telos of social evolution one and the same for all societies, all spiritual impulses, and religious forms? If, as Ferrer (2002) has argued, there is a plurality of religious and spiritual phenomena as manifested in individuals, then what about societies? Are they evolving towards one goal, or are they, to use Ferrer’s metaphor, moving towards different shores?

In answer to the first question, most socio-spiritual theorists, but notably Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1972a) and Wilber (1995), agree that certain participatory practices consciously undertaken by individuals would help in the evolution towards a spiritual society. Contrary to mainstream sociologists who, following Durkheim, view societies purely as objective units, these theorists recognize a mutually influential and reciprocal relationship between a society and its members. Given the differences in their beliefs as to what constitutes the motor of evolution, Wilber and Sri Aurobindo differ in their view of social evolution.

As mentioned earlier, Wilber (1995) seems to privilege a cognitive basis to evolution, and consequently believes that evolutionary changes are always brought about by evolved individuals who through their theories and through related institutions effect a change in the socio-cultural worldview. Wilber initially set up the Integral Institute with as many thinkers from as wide a range of disciplines as possible with the belief that his cohort, because of their higher consciousness, could spearhead the evolutionary drive towards a planetary culture. Wilber (2000a), following Lenski (1970), also believes that the techno-economic means of production “profoundly influences the consciousness of men and women” (p. 147).

While Sri Aurobindo’s (Ghose, 1972a) evolutionary vision gives primacy to the Divine evolutionary force, his path of Integral Yoga presupposes the possibility of conscious participation in evolution. It needs to be noted here that Sri Aurobindo distinguishes between scientific evolution and spiritual evolution and for the latter process underlines the importance of relying on the descent of

the Divine Force, especially in safeguarding the spiritual development of the individual. Like Holland (1988), Sri Aurobindo holds that society, like the individual, is a fundamental expression of the Divine Spirit. The collective and the individual are mutually connected in that the society gives the individual a greater opportunity to express and fulfill herself/himself, and simultaneously the individual's inner growth has a positive effect on the society. This relationship between the individual and the society is characteristic of the differentiated unity present in complex, evolving systems. In Sri Aurobindo's vision, the individual, being capable of conscious participation, has the potential to lead the collective evolutionary journey, and, as noted earlier, a spiritual society can only be formed by spiritualized individuals. Sri Aurobindo places emphasis on the importance of integrally developing all the parts of one's being—the physical, mental and emotional—and for an integral approach to the Divine. Perceiving all life as yoga Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1990) instructs that every aspect of life should be taken up in Integral Yoga to realize its goal of a spiritual evolution and world-transformation.

Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1990) also sees the necessity of including people from all walks of life and at all stages of development in Integral Yoga in order to effect a collective spiritual transformation through the action of the Divine force. Consequently, in Auroville there is a popular belief that each person has a unique role to play in the spiritual evolution, but also represents a fault or deformation of general humanity that needs to be transformed. Talking to her disciples the Mother once said, "each one of you represents one of the difficulties which must

be conquered for the transformation” (as cited in Satprem, 1968, p. 356). The inseparable connection between the individual and the collective is based on the fact that both are constituted from the same forces of nature. And in Integral Yoga, one consciously accepts this connection with all its implications:

Accepting life, he [the seeker of Integral Yoga] has to bear not only his own burden, but a great part of the world’s burden too along with it . . . He has not only to conquer in himself the forces of egoistic falsehood and disorder, but to conquer them as representatives of the same adverse and inexhaustible forces in the world (Ghose, 1990, p. 77).

There are notable differences between Sri Aurobindo’s and Wilber’s approach. Wilber, on the one hand, emphasizes a cognitive understanding of the planetary culture and not, as both Paulson (2004) and Ferrer (2003) point out, on the lived experience of ordinary individuals. Limiting the role of the intellect in this transformation, the Mother once said in a message to Aurovilians, “A simple and ignorant peasant here is, in his [sic] heart, closer to the Divine than the intellectuals of Europe” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 251). The point here is that, as Ferrer (2002) suggests, a spiritualized life is not the prerogative of intellectuals but accessible to all and at all different levels of the person. Sri Aurobindo similarly attests that is only by engaging with life one can transform life. Unlike Wilber, who relies on people cognizant of the aperspectival vision logic to effect the next evolutionary change, Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1970) deemed it necessary to include a diversity of people who were open to the Divine influence in the yoga. Diversity or greater differentiation, as noted earlier, is critical to the evolutionary process for it adds to the complexity of a system and generates changes or fluctuations that can lead to the emergence of new structures.

It is debatable how far social institutions shape the spirituality of their members. Wilber's (2000a) postulate that the techno-economic means of production mould the consciousness of the individuals logically leads to his and Lenski's (1970) conclusion that an information society automatically results in a planetary consciousness—an inference that I find problematic. As opposed to this, and in agreement with Griffin (1988), I argue that while individuals are products of their socio-cultural environments, they nevertheless have a considerable degree of autonomy in shaping both their own development and the development of society. Jantsch, as noted earlier, from his study of brain structures, neural processes and the power of human ideas and values, similarly concludes that society is shaped by "our own individual mentations. We determine the 'inner limits of mankind' . . . to an even higher extent than we do the outer limits with the help of technology" (1980, p. 176).

In a world characterized by deep-rooted social inequities, availability and use of technology is often dependent on the availability of resources to the individual and the society. The consciousness or the wisdom of the individual and the society is marked more by the values they hold than their knowledge and use of material technology. Consequently, I would argue, and as can be generally observed in a world that is punctuated by terrorist attacks, the ability to use sophisticated technology or participate in the information age does not automatically result in a higher consciousness. Conversely, because of the values one holds, one can participate in a farming lifestyle and consciously choose to till the land with primitive agricultural implements but still operate from a higher

level of consciousness. Thus, Auroville has a healthy agricultural sector comprising mostly educated Westerners who have turned their backs on the technological means of food production to farm the land organically and as sustainably as possible, eschewing for instance, a polluting, gasoline tractor for a bullock-drawn plough to till the land. As Laszlo says, the “dominant values of a civilization can discourage the practical application of technological inventions” (1987, p. 99).

Following Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1972a) and Russell (1995), I further believe that as one spiritually develops to embody a higher consciousness, one also consequently possesses not only greater autonomy from the determining forces of life, but also greater power in effecting a change in others. Like Russell, I believe that this social evolutionary process may one day lead to a consciousness age that unifies the planet, but as of yet, there are no definitive signs of the global emergence of a true planetary and spiritual consciousness. Lastly, it is perhaps erroneous to assume, as Wilber (1995, 2000a) does, that the economics of constant production can possibly form the basis of a spiritual society. Sri Aurobindo, foreseeing the end of both capitalism and socialism, viewed economics in terms of spiritual values rather than of material necessities:

The aim of its [that of a spiritual society] economics would be not to create a huge engine of production, whether of the competitive or the co-operative kind, but to give to men—not only to some but to all men each in his highest possible measure—the joy of work according to their own nature, and free leisure to grow inwardly, as well as a simple, rich and beautiful life for all. (Ghose, 1971, p. 257)

Nicolescu, in his transdisciplinary understanding of social structures and the human being, closely echoes Sri Aurobindo when he says that economics should

serve the human being and offer each individual “the greatest capacity for cultural and spiritual development” (2002, p. 143). Griffin (1988), similarly pointing out that both socialism and capitalism are products of a modern worldview, calls for constructive postmodern alternatives to the current economic paradigms. While, in terms of its ideals, Auroville envisions an idealistic stage where one works for the joy of expressing oneself or serving and not to earn a living, in practice, Aurovilians have not yet found a suitable economic structure that would embody or help foster these ideals. It is also worthwhile noting here that neither Sri Aurobindo, the Mother, or any contemporary theorist have actually detailed what an economic system that caters to individual growth would look like. As perhaps Nicolescu (2002) would say, it would be self-defeating to formulate a theoretical blueprint for an alternative economic system with our present rational consciousness. A multipronged effort, both at the level of theory and practice, has to be constantly made in the search for an alternative economic system that serves and does not stifle the spirit of the individual. It is to the credit of Aurovilians that in the past 40 years, they have constantly experimented with different forms of economic systems, and currently Auroville exhibits a mix of capitalistic (even sometimes monopolistic), cooperative and gift systems. As detailed earlier, the attitudes many Aurovilians show towards their work already embody a spiritual rather than a materialistic ideal, and some, in accordance with Sri Aurobindo’s vision, deliberately adopt a lifestyle of “voluntary simplicity,” as was mentioned to me by A.

Emphasizing the role of the self-reflexive mind in shaping society, Jantsch points out that, more so than material processes, social evolution is determined by “guiding images,” which he, following Markley and Harman (1974/1982), defines as “the individual mental structures on the one hand and self-organizing mental macrostructures on the other” (1980, p. 179). To this perspective, I would like to add that intentional communities consciously choose their intentions, “guiding images” and values for their society; hence perhaps they are better equipped to promote social evolution rather than amorphous nation-states, which are often driven more by socio-economic structures than by the guiding images of their culture or their political constitution. Auroville has the power to greatly enhance the dynamics of the evolutionary process because its “guiding images,” for example, the ideals enshrined in its Charter (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200), are cast in such broad, idealistic terms that they allow for the participation of any number of differentiated individuals and nation-states without their feeling restricted in any way.^{liii} Further, Markley points out that when guiding images are anticipatory, “they ‘lead’ social development. . . . They have, as it were, a ‘magnetic pull’ toward the future. By their attractiveness and legitimacy they reinforce each movement that takes the society toward them” (1976, p. 214). As the spiritual ideals or guiding images of Auroville, envision high transpersonal aims for the individual, society and the world, they exert a continual telos on Aurovilians for their realization. The guiding images of Auroville never lose their power to influence society. Unlike Markley’s (1976) and Jantsch’s (1980) predictions about mainstream society, in Auroville, the guiding images never lag behind

sociocultural development. Finally, as Auroville's spiritual ideals are cast in broad, general terms and include the ideal of self-organization, they allow for the full play of the evolutionary principles of a complex, open, self-organizing system without seeking to restrict them in any way.

Regarding the question of the telos of evolution, it is not an issue that can be easily or definitively answered, given the variety of societies and religious orders and the span of time it takes for societies to evolve.^{liv} However, as Griffin (1988), Holland (1988), Wexler (2000) and Forman (2004) seem to assume, it could also well be that there are characteristics such as embodiment, engagement in social and environmental issues, and a re-definition of one's personal identity, which may be common to all spiritual societies. Spiritual societies, given their different religious orientations, may have different beliefs about transcendental and/or intangible realities, and yet they may develop common attitudes towards immanent reality and everyday life. It could also be that axial religions themselves are developing in ways that differ from their stated original concerns and intentions, to embrace the above characteristics of a postsecular spirituality. Buddhism, for example, both in Asia and in the States, has come to embrace a socially engaged spirituality that was previously absent (e.g., see Rothberg, 2006). Forman, attesting to the presence of a shared spiritual worldview among different religions, states: "In talking about modern day Sufis, renewal Jews and spiritual business people, we're not talking about apples, spare tires and machine guns, but something more like Red Delicious, Macintosh and Granny Smiths" (p. 71).

In a more recent article on spirituality in contemporary society, Bauwens (2007) concludes that just as society is moving towards peer-based, self-organized, distributed networks, similarly spiritual practices are moving towards being relational, participatory and contributory. Even though he does not refer to it as such, Bauwens' observations about contemporary social processes in the information age are in keeping with the scientific, evolutionary process of differentiation, integration and self-organization. Just as Jantsch (1980) underscores the importance of guiding images in socio-cultural evolution and Laszlo (1987) speaks of the immense need to take up practical goals and tasks for conscious social evolution, Bauwens too emphasizes on the necessity of having an "object of the sociality" to "integrate the subjective element of human intentionality" (p. 41). Akin to Kohut's (1971) self-object psychological dynamics, Bauwens specifically notes the following:

Human agents . . . always relate around an object in a concrete fashion. The object energizes relationships and mobilizes action. Humans can have more abstract objects that are located in a temporal future such as object of desire. . . . [Humans] activate themselves to realize the desire individually and collectively. (p. 41)

In agreement with Bauwens, I contend that the spiritual vision of Auroville has served as the collective desired object for Aurovilians. Auroville's transpersonal ideals, its guiding images, to use Markley's (1976) and Jantsch's (1980) terminology, act as the telos that exerts a pull on individuals to transcend themselves and on the community towards a spiritual society, and in doing so, it accounts for the expression of a unique social psychology.^{lv} In the rest of this chapter, I examine the social psychology of Auroville as a spiritual society: I note

general characteristics of Auroville that are similar to other empirical data or theoretical postulates on contemporary spirituality, and I specifically study it as a community that embraces the philosophic ideals of Integral Yoga. Unlike Chapter 5, where I examined the social psychology of Auroville as a dialectical relation between the individual and the collective as mediated by common social categories of race, class, age, gender and culture, here I focus on transpersonal, psychological characteristics as exhibited by individuals and the collective. Interestingly, I did not come across any significant shadow issues in this study of the spiritual beliefs and practices of Aurovilians, with the shadow again being defined as something that directly contradicts the ideal. I do, however, identify certain challenges that face Auroville, in its spiritual development, both at the individual and the collective level.

Auroville as a Spiritual Society

As has been noted earlier, the Mother started Auroville as a crucible for furthering human evolution as envisioned by Sri Aurobindo, and given its related goal of human unity, a diversity of nationalities, cultures and psychological types are sought to be included in Auroville. While in certain messages, having goodwill is regarded by the Mother as being “sufficient to gain admittance” to Auroville (Alfassa, 1980, p. 210), in other writings, such as the Charter, to be an Aurovilian means “one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 199). In still other messages, the Mother explicitly states that “to be an Aurovilian one must at least belong to the enlightened portion of humanity and aspire for the higher consciousness” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 216). In

practice, Auroville accepts everyone with basic goodwill who wants to join the experiment but recommends that, in their one-year probationary period, they familiarize themselves with the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, particularly on the ideals of the community.

Auroville, however, is not a microcosm of the world as many make it out to be. First of all, current social, economic and political factors have ensured that many developing nations of the world are under-represented or not represented at all in Auroville. Secondly, while as Pillai (2005) notes, one can live in Auroville without belonging to any faith, the reverse is not true. In other words, a professed faith to other institutionalized religions and groups is explicitly not welcome in Auroville. As is to be expected in a postsecular society (M. King, 2004), the Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians who have joined Auroville have no formal connection to the religions of their birth. The only exception here, as noted in an Chapter 5, is in the case of local Aurovilians who often continue their practice of worshipping in their local temples. There are also communal celebrations of certain Hindu festivals such as *Ganeṣ* and *Saraswatī Pūjā*, regular gatherings of Buddhist *vipaśana* meditation and devotional chanting sessions. In this context, it is interesting to note that only selected Indian spiritual practices are allowed in Auroville, perhaps because these can be performed without their being part of an institutionalized belief system. To live in Auroville it is generally expected that one has some knowledge and acceptance of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

General Characteristics of Auroville as a Spiritual Society

A few people spoke of their spiritual path in Auroville in general terms, such as: “It’s a place that has given me a lot—to know a lot about myself, and be able to see others also in this light”; “the opportunity to work on some of my issues (a few maybe)”; “to be able to think consciously about anything; bringing me closer to some of my inner quests” (Appendix E). The vast majority of the survey respondents, however, specifically mentioned aspects of Integral Yoga, while delineating their own path. As these responses were made to the general question of “what do you like about Auroville?” it again points to the fact that spirituality is the overriding factor in the lives of many Aurovilians.

In discussing my research findings of Auroville as a spiritual society, I first describe the following general features that it has in common with other postsecular expressions of spirituality, and then, secondly, I examine specific characteristics of Auroville that pertain to the discipline of Integral Yoga. The general features that Auroville has in common with other spiritual societies are: (a) Spirituality as part of everyday life; (b) a different notion of the Self; (c) transformative interpersonal relationships; (d) an immanent notion of the Divine; (f) evolutionary perspectives, which additionally include (g) self-organization, (e) individual freedom, (h) a new relation to time, (i) a relationship with nature, and (j) differentiation in unity.

Spirituality as Part of Everyday Life

Spirituality is individually interpreted by Aurovilians and yet somehow contained within the broad context of Integral Yoga and its insistence on engagement with daily life. This is best expressed by Carol who says:

It doesn't make sense to . . . retreat from everyday life to find spirituality. For me that isn't real. It is not. It doesn't make sense. For me what feels right for me is rather the other way round, to look for spirituality in everyday life, to look for ways to live spiritually, to integrate spirituality into everyday life.

Most Aurovilians actually do not seem to follow any regular spiritual practices. There is a commonly accepted view that just through their work and by choosing to live in Auroville, Aurovilians participate in the spiritual evolution of humankind. People imbue their daily life in with symbolic, spiritual values that at once include and transcend physical reality, as stated by two respondents:

I like everything that I do and the kind of life that I have here. It is difficult for me to stress some aspects more than others, but if I try to underline some I would like to mention: the possibility to align my inner aspirations with the totality of my life and my work here. I have a sense of living in a permanent adventure in my work, my studies, in all my daily activities.

My everyday life is part of my spiritual path, as well as being part of building "the city the earth needs." (Appendix E)

Though other commentators on postsecular spirituality do not place emphasis on this issue, I believe that having a spiritual orientation to all of one's life is a crucial indicator of a turn towards a spiritualized life and society. It heals the deep schism between objectivity and subjectivity that was brought about by modernity and allows for a holistic lifestyle that does not differentiate between the sacred and the secular. By doing so, I believe, we naturally move towards the aperspectival vision-logic of a higher consciousness that is advocated by Wilber

(1995). A holistic outlook recasts the customary dualistic perspective on life into an integral perspective, as is evident from the following two responses by

Aurovilians:

Auroville is a community: where I live, eat, work and play is integrated/one. This is critical for my quality of life.

I live in Auroville. Full point. I would sincerely not be able to answer this question [of what one likes and dislikes about Auroville] as I have stopped thinking in terms of likes and dislikes ever since I started living in Auroville in September '94. (Appendix E)

A Different Notion of the Self

The modern self divorced from spirituality, individualized, and alienated, feels the need to defend itself from hostile others. In contrast, as Wexler suggests, in a spiritual society the self would be “open and debounded, rather than separate and defended” (2000, p. 135-36). In Chapter 5, when discussing the notion of personal identity, I had already pointed out that Aurovilians feel a greater sense of freedom in Auroville than in their native cultures. Even more specifically, the first step to be a “true Aurovilian” is to find that “at our inmost centre there is a free being, wide and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the acting centre of our being and our life in Auroville” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 213). A couple of survey respondents specifically mentioned finding a new self-identity by breaking free from their original social and cultural conditioning.

This discovery of a new identity inevitably results in happiness as notably expressed by one respondent who wrote:

I am deeply happy here, in spite of occasional difficulties, inner or outward. I have never felt so free in my life. It took several years for my self-image, collected during a rather long life from conditioning,

professional expectations and appreciation, and society in general to scrape off and shed all that crust. (Appendix E)

For Swaminathan, the difference in his perceived notion of self is so great that he sees himself as having had two different lives: “Within this 41 years, I have 2 sections—Swaminathan before entering physically into Auroville, and after entering Auroville.” Further elaborating on this issue of what it means to be an Aurovilian, Swaminathan says:

For me to be an Aurovilian is a very big opening for a person, to understand many things—I might not achieve all these things in this lifetime but I don’t care, I am an Aurovilian and whatever I achieve in this lifetime is enough!

A sense of self-identity that does not accrue from social and cultural factors automatically means that one must have the capacity for deeper self-questioning, which in turn results in a greater sense of happiness or self-fulfillment. Sarah, who was born and brought up in Auroville and then went to Europe for six years for her studies, feels that because of her upbringing she is a happy person with a positive outlook, much more so than most Europeans. She was also surprised to find that most people in Europe seemed content to just live, work, and go out for holidays without ever questioning what life was all about or taking a deeper look into themselves.

Finally, in Integral Yoga, one aspires for a self that is open at all levels to the influx of the Divine force, for as the Charter states: “To live in Auroville one must be the willing servitor of a Divine consciousness” (1980, p. 199). A Tamil woman respondent reflecting on her self-identity in Auroville indicates such a growth towards a transpersonal notion of self when she writes:

Auroville made me my own self. Just 10 kms down in Pondicherry [a nearby town], I might be living nearby as a daughter, wife, lawyer etc. but not myself. It's possible outside as well. But the freedom in Auroville taught me the best discipline and taught me to be myself. And this self, I want to happily offer for 'Divine consciousness.' (Appendix E)

Transformative Interpersonal Relationships

As opposed to the narcissistic individualism of modernism and the nihilistic relativism of deconstructive postmodernism, a constructive postmodern or postsecular spirituality accords a high value to intersubjective relationships between individuals (Cobb, 1988; Griffin, 1988; Keller, 1988). Griffin explains that in such a society individuals do not see themselves as self-contained entities but rather accept that “the relations one has with one’s body, one’s larger natural environment, one’s family and culture are indeed *constitutive* [emphasis in original] of one’s very identity” (p. 14). Forman’s (2004) study infers that community and group process are deemed to be an integral part of grassroots spirituality in USA. Integral Yoga differs philosophically from this stance in that it views the individual as being a unique and autonomous entity (Ghose, 1972a). Similarly the Mother writes:

The first necessity is the inner discovery by which one learns who one really is behind the social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At our inmost centre there is a free being, wide and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the acting centre of our being and our life in Auroville (Alfassa, 1980, p. 213).

Rather than emphasizing an individual’s relationship with others, Integral Yoga, as evidenced in the first line of the Auroville Charter, sees the individual’s relationship with the Divine consciousness as the essential base for all of life’s activities. In their lived experience, Aurovilians, as was noted in Chapter 5, are

often saddened and frustrated by the lack of community in Auroville, and yet what inspires many people to continue to live here is a felt sense of the Divine consciousness. Oliver recollects in his interview how in the early years he would feel a tangible vibration, “as though the air had changed,” when, after having been out, he was re-entering the Auroville area. “For a long time now,” he continues, “I had stopped feeling it, and just the other day, when I was just out cycling, I felt it again. It was there!”

This does not necessarily mean that Aurovilians are not affected by their interpersonal relationships with each other. There are quite a few who left Auroville precisely because of their frustration at the lack of community. More tellingly, an Aurovillian who has lived here for about 22 years, but now feels ambivalent about the experiment, expressed to me that he feels that the larger community of Auroville rather than encouraging people “to do their yoga somehow brings out the worst in people” (personal communication, October 22, 2007).

But then again, for other Aurovilians, “the experience of being in the social world increasingly resembles core elements of mystical experience rather than mechanical interchanges” (Wexler, 2000, p. 4). One of my survey respondents wrote that in Auroville she/he felt “a spontaneous, inner connection with individuals, sometimes even if I don’t know them well. (I experienced this before I came to Auroville, but never so often or with such a diversity of individuals)” (Appendix E).

Ideally, Integral Yoga envisions that social relationships with others would always be informed by the individual's primal relationship with the Divine. To a certain extent this seems to be embodied in the lives and work of some Aurovilians. A, an architect, describes how the group called Dreamcatchers seeks to bring about innovative solutions to town planning through a collective, participatory process that honors both the transcendental ideal of Auroville and the immanent, ongoing relationship with others:

This is what appeals to me about the Dreamcatchers. The idea that we, as Aurovilians, can dream this city into existence. Not just that this city is there and we have to call it down, but that each of us has the possibility to see some of what the vision of the city is and help call it down. When I talk about dreams, I don't talk about mini dreams, personal dreams, but Mother's dream. It's Her dream that we are trying to catch, and this takes us out of our egoistic, small selves. That's the aim. Trying to find methods, which means we can create more holistically together.

The method, as described to me by A, is highly similar to the peer-to-peer dynamics, described by Bauwens, in that it results in a common idea that has "integrated the differences, not subsumed them. Participants do not feel that they have made concessions or compromises, but they feel that the new common integration is based on their ideas" (2007, p. 42).

Whether Aurovilians view their interpersonal relationships with others in positive or negative terms, where Auroville differs significantly from mainstream, capitalistic societies is in the fact that given the small size of the community and the proximity of its members to one another, intersubjective communication is not just an interchange of signified texts "but of multiple substances of vitality, bodily breath and fluid . . . these interchanges are not exchanges but transformations" (Wexler, 2000, p. 137). As in other intentional communities, where people

construct their lives together around a shared ideal, social interaction in Auroville is embodied in ways that would just not be possible in mainstream societies, where individuals largely lead alienated lives. There is a visceral quality to interactions among Aurovilians, which is absent in modern and radically postmodern societies; though, as Carol pointed out, both with the growth of administrative, working groups and with the prevalent use of e-mail in Auroville, these days people no longer settle their disagreements in face-to-face encounters. She feels that one should always take the responsibility of trying to clear up a misunderstanding or a conflict on a first-hand, face-to-face basis, for in the end one has to live with these people and perhaps encounter them on a daily basis.

An Immanent Notion of the Divine

Constructive postmodernist spirituality, eschewing supernaturalism and atheism “affirms a vision . . . according to which the world is present in deity and deity is present in the world” (Griffin, 1988, p. 17). Such a concept of immanent Divinity is at the core of Sri Aurobindo’s teaching and was echoed by a survey respondent who stated that he/she lived in Auroville “to see the One in all existence, to see all existence in the One” and “to have forever the experience of ‘satyam ritam brihat ananda’” [a Vedic formulation of the nature of the immanent Divine used by Sri Aurobindo]. Practitioners of Integral Yoga, actually take this concept of the immanent Divine a step further in that they see each person as being a unique embodiment of the Divine working out a unique relationship with the transcendent and immanent Divine. This realization fosters tolerance and acceptance. Oliver hinted as such when he mentioned that one of the most

challenging aspects of his life in Auroville was to live in community with people that he, at first, felt did not subscribe to Auroville's ideals. Accepting the fact that these people were also an integral part of the spiritual experiment of Auroville consequently led to Oliver's own growth.

As I go on to examine notions of spiritual evolution, it needs to be clarified that while immanence is inherently a characteristic of evolutionary philosophies, the corollary is not true. That is to say, one can subscribe to a spiritual path, such as pantheistic native American traditions, that do not necessarily subscribe to the idea of evolution. In contrast to pantheism, evolutionary spiritual paths are by definition *panentheistic* [emphasis added], that is, as noted earlier, the Divine is seen as being both immanent and transcendent.

Evolutionary Perspectives

While Russell (1995) views the emergence of spirituality as a natural consequence of social evolution, others, such as Forman (2004), Griffin (1988) or Wexler (2000) do not explicitly speak about social evolution in their discussions on contemporary spirituality. As an experiment in Integral Yoga, Auroville enshrines the ideal of individual and social evolution. While some Aurovilians spoke of Integral Yoga and Auroville's ideals in general terms, such as "this is a good place for integral yoga," "leading a spiritual life according to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother," fulfilling "Mother's dream," and "building the city the earth needs" (Appendix E), a few people viewed their life in terms of Integral Yoga's co-creative evolutionary goal. They cited "participation in the discovery of a new human being, centered on its Divine reality," "that it is an experiment to evolve

higher consciousness—individually and collectively,” “sharing the conscious co-creation for our evolution” and “to be part of an evolutionary experiment” as their reasons for liking Auroville (Appendix E). In my study here, I view Auroville as a complex evolutionary system. The principle of human unity that has brought together approximately 2,000 people from different countries and cultures into a single collective entity underscores the complexity of Auroville. The complexity of Auroville is further enhanced by the rich and multivalent relationship it has with the local rural population and its host country, India. As mentioned earlier Auroville has porous borders and is open, at various socio-economic and cultural levels, to exchanges with the outside world. Because of such exchanges and because of the increase in complexity resulting from its growth, there are always random fluctuations that, on the one hand, tend to disrupt the stability of Auroville, and on the other hand, push it towards greater growth through the emergence of still more complex systems. Auroville’s continued development will depend, from an evolutionary perspective, on whether or not it has the self-organizing capacity to constantly re-invent itself as an increasingly complex structure.

Self-organization.

Self-organization, that is the emergence of an autonomous order without the imposition of any hierarchical processes, is identified as a hallmark of the evolutionary process. Forman finds the grassroots spirituality of USA to be “devoid of leadership or overarching organization” (2004, p. 4) though he fails to make the connection that this aspect of contemporary spirituality could well be a

sign of social evolution. Auroville implicitly embodies this evolutionary mechanism in its organizational ideal of Divine anarchy. As mentioned earlier, The Mother explains that “the anarchic state is the self-government of each individual, and it will be the perfect government only when each one becomes conscious of the inner Divine and will obey only him and him [sic] alone” (Alfassa, 2000, p. 76). The inner Divine to which the Mother refers is the psychic being and, when people are conscious of it, they can “organize themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 225). Such an ideal organization, where people are conscious of their psychic beings and live according to the supramental truth, would automatically lead to a natural hierarchical harmony where everyone would find their place. It would result in what Nicolescu terms as *transhumanism*, that is, “the maximal actualization of unity in diversity and diversity in unity” (2002, p. 144).

As with the economic organization, Auroville constantly experiments with organizational structures, believing that the organization should be determined by consciousness and not the other way round. As the Mother says, “Organization is a discipline of action, but for Auroville we aspire to go beyond organizations, which are arbitrary and artificial. We want an organization that is the expression of a higher consciousness working for the manifestation of the truth” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 205). This ideal is subjectively cherished as evidenced by one survey respondent who said that what he/she likes about Auroville is “the possibilities in the diversity from which one can find her own unique way to grow and contribute to the whole” (Appendix E).

Leard (1993), exploring the dialectical tension between spontaneity and structure in his thesis on Auroville, concludes that it is precisely the engaged spiritual practice of Aurovilians, a practice that is at once characterized by inner mysticism and worldly engagement, which accounts for the community's success in maintaining a spiritual enthusiasm for Auroville's ideals despite the demise of its founder three decades ago. In the 15 years since Leard's study, however, Auroville has increasingly moved, in direct contradiction to its own ideals, towards a more structured society. Since 1988 Auroville, as per the Auroville Foundation Act of the Government of India, has a three-part structure comprising the Governing Board, the International Advisory Council and the Residents' Assembly. Partly because of the involvement of the Indian Government in Auroville, and partly to meet the needs of an ever-growing composite society and ensure fairness and transparency, Auroville has developed structures that govern all aspects of collective life such as housing, town-planning, the economy, conflict-resolution, and entry and exit regulations. Over the years, these structures and governing bodies have become increasingly complex, clumsy and bureaucratic. The following four survey responses noted current organizational structures as being challenging factors in one's life in Auroville:

The increasingly bureaucratic set-up, government interference.

The organization—complex, clumsy to more forward coherently or collectively.

The [bureaucratic] administration.

I think the Entry Group and the Housing Group should be totally reorganized with qualified people handling clear instructions about it. Modern organization-ideas should be introduced. (Appendix F)

Bureaucracy is the very shadow of the flexible spiritual organization, the Divine anarchy envisaged by the Mother. The erosion of idealism in this context was noted by two participants who disapprovingly wrote that there was “too much emphasis on planning infrastructure” and that “the energy of the community is very much spent on establishing its name rather than proceeding with what is supposed to be done” (Appendix F). Equally telling was the fact that the community, instead of finding its leaders to be enlightened, as the Mother hoped they would be, found them to be untrustworthy and driven by egoism. Wrote one woman, “Many people in ‘power’ positions don’t actually have good will but do have very big egos. This aspect of Auroville is discouraging. There is corruption and dysfunction like anywhere else in the world” (Appendix F). At the focus group interview, Sonia, elaborating on the Mother’s ideal of consciousness determining the organizational form, concluded:

It’s one of the many failures . . . I’ve come to the conclusion this ideal city that we’re aiming at is meant to be a product of a higher level of consciousness. So if we collectively haven’t managed to achieve that higher level of consciousness, then Auroville won’t be what it’s supposed to be.

While sociologically, following Leard (1993), I would suggest that Aurovilians resist routinization into rational-legal authoritative structure. From an evolutionary perspective I would like to emphasize that it is actually crucial that Auroville always has the freedom to experiment with flexible organizational structures. While the Mother underscored the importance of discipline and organization in work, she insisted that “the organization itself must be flexible and progressive” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 205). The Western concept of anarchy

connotes resistance and freedom from all institutionalized government, but Divine anarchy, to my mind, does not imply that there be no governing structures; rather it implies flexibility in the system that allows for experimentation in governing structures. As Jantsch, theorizing on evolutionary dynamics in society, eloquently puts it: “To live in an evolutionary spirit means to engage with full ambition and without any reserve in the structure of the present, and yet to let go and flow into a new structure when the right time has come” (1980, p. 255).

The inherent self-organizing tendency enshrined in the concept of Divine Anarchy implies that this ideal cannot be imposed as an authoritative structure by any one sector of the Auroville society, for self-organization is something that emerges within a group when it collectively takes an evolutionary step. By its very nature, Divine Anarchy is a collective spiritual ideal, which even if it were to be influenced and guided by a few, has to be embodied by all of society.

Individual freedom.

While other social scientists and evolutionary thinkers do not mention it as such, I believe that freedom is a powerful guiding image necessary for the evolution of human society. Freedom is inherent to the evolutionary process at the level of matter (physics) and life (biology), but at the level of mind (social sciences), it often has to be consciously adopted by the society as a value or an ideal in order to draw forth the full, unrestricted participation of the individual in the evolutionary process. Freedom of the individual is one of the fundamental principles of capitalistic democratic societies, and the process of secularization, has liberated society from the authoritative power of institutionalized religions.

Yet, even in democratic societies, the social script of behavioral norms is already written out, which restricts individuals from fully exploring their capabilities or trying out different identities (Kamau, 2002). In contrast, in secular intentional communities and in Auroville individuals feel a greater sense of freedom for they are not restricted by social roles and distinctions.

In Auroville the notion of individual freedom stems from the transpersonal belief In Integral Yoga, as mentioned earlier, that each individual has a unique psychic being and therefore a unique relationship to the Divine. It is by following one's own psychic being that one collaborates in the supramental transformation. Because of this belief, Aurovilians are largely free to define their lifestyle and standard of living in ways they choose from celibacy to polyamory, from a monastic, solitary life to communal living, from comfortable affluence to ecologically sustainable and voluntarily simplistic lifestyles.^{lvi} 27 survey-respondents cherished the freedom that they feel in Auroville (Appendix E).

In Chapter 5, I had discussed that Aurovilians feel free to explore and affirm a personal identity that is different from what would have been possible within the socio-cultural matrix of mainstream society. I would like to add here that this sense of freedom to explore a different identity extends to the transpersonal realm, as was evident from the following five answers in response to the question “what do you like about living in Auroville?”:

The freedom in the choice of ways to rise in consciousness.

The relative freedom to live a life that is more directed by inner forces than outer.

Freedom and the ambition to choose our way to a higher consciousness.

The freedom to find one's deeper self.

Living with so much open-ended possibility to explore, create and manifest what one is guided to do. (Appendix E)

There is always the danger that freedom, especially freedom without the discipline of an ordained practice can—and probably in a number of cases does—lead to unrestricted hedonism of the egoistic self. In a mature personality, however, the sense of freedom is crucial to growth. For example, one woman wrote that “the freedom in Auroville taught me the best discipline to be myself. And this self, I want to happily offer for ‘Divine consciousness’” (Appendix E).

I would further like to conjecture that freedom perhaps plays a crucial role in this yoga of transformation. What I have observed in Auroville, in myself and in others, is that, perhaps because life is not bounded by social rules, roles, distinctions and categories, sometimes one's worst traits of personality are exhibited in interpersonal interactions. But it could well be that precisely because such deformations of one's character are given expression rather than being suppressed, there is the possibility for their transformation by the light and action of the Divine Force, not only at an individual level, but also at planetary level because of the inherent oneness of the universe. As Sri Aurobindo explains, “If only sattwic [virtuous] and cultured men [sic] come for yoga . . . then, because the difficulty of the vital element in terrestrial nature has not been faced and overcome, it might well be that the endeavor would fail” (Ghose, 1970, p. 828). From a Western psychological perspective, this is a problematic issue fraught with assumptions. One assumes that that there is a Divine Force helping the

individual and that one has the capability of receiving and assimilating this Force to successfully overcome one's psychological problems and deformations. There is the possibility, as was mentioned to me by a resident Western psychologist, that Aurovilians delude themselves into thinking that they are participating in a collective yoga of transformation, when in reality they are embedded in psychological pathologies.

A new relation to time.

An evolutionary perspective on life automatically results in cultivating a different orientation to time, which for Griffin (1988) is a defining characteristic of constructive postmodern spirituality. Both Wilber (2000a) and Griffin (1988) comment that the extreme individualism fostered by modernity has led to a narcissistic attitude where the lure of short-term gains has resulted in an over-exploitation of the resources of the planet and a lack of concern for future generations. This myopic outlook is corrected in a constructive postmodern spirituality by a cosmological outlook that on the one hand recognizes that we have been deeply constituted, by the very atoms in our bodies, by our past, and on the other hand has a deep concern for the future, for it realizes that the viability of the planet is essential for the continuation of evolution Griffin (1988).

Aurovilians have come to accept that evolution does not happen overnight but over a long span of time. Oliver explains that initially he expected Auroville to develop much faster, but then when he realized how long it took him to grow and change, he accepted that the collective growth of Auroville would be even slower. From general conversations with Aurovilians, I gathered that while some

were greatly concerned about the ecological challenges facing humanity, many were unconcerned about the issue, drawing comfort in the belief of the promised supramental transformation of matter and the Mother's assurance that the Earth would not be destroyed, though it would go through momentous changes. In my opinion, this collectively-held belief represents a shadow in the spiritual practice of Aurovilians. When people blindly trust the words of a spiritual leader without it being backed by a direct experience or by an insight arrived at through deep introspection, there is always the danger that people regress into pre-modern religiosity with its belief in a pre-ordained reality or, as Ferrer puts it, in the "Myth of the Given" (2002, p. 156). When one takes the future as a given reality and not something that one co-creates, then one tends to be more complacent about the environmental consequences of one's present actions. Also, by shifting the responsibility for a spiritualized future to a posited Divine force, people limit their own agency in participating in the work of the Divine reality. One Aurovilian, a forester and a passionate environmentalist, espoused the interesting opinion that one can help in the supramental transformation by deeply engaging with and helping alleviate the current reality of a suffering Earth (personal communication, July 15, 2007). Such a stance is in consonance with Jantsch's examination of the self-reflexive consciousness where "not only can the experience of the past become effective in the present . . . the new capability of *anticipation* [emphasis in original] makes the future also effective in the present" (1980, p. 171).

A relationship with nature.

Griffin (1988) and Spretnak (1988) espouse the view that postsecular spirituality is marked by a deeper connection to the natural world, where individuals do not feel alienated from nature but are at home with it. Auroville's commendable work in greening the earth has resulted in fostering a relationship between the residents and the natural world. Over half-a-dozen people mentioned their appreciation for the natural environment, evident, for example, in the response: "[I like] the greenness, the light as it's reflected in the variety of colors." (Appendix E). Two respondents reflected their connection to nature in terms of their own spiritual growth:

The natural environment provides a balance in my life never before experienced.

A stimulating environment that encourages a close contact with Nature and oneself. (Appendix E)

As mentioned earlier, an evolutionary conception of spirituality does not restrict the Divine's presence to human beings but views the Divine as being immanent in the entire universe. An interconnection with nature simply exemplifies the characteristic of complexity—of differentiation in unity—in the evolutionary process.

Differentiation in unity.

While delineating the social psychology of Auroville in Chapter 5, I examined at length the economic and the cultural diversity that exists within Auroville and the immediate bioregion of which it is inherently a part. This diversity, as seen earlier, makes Auroville a highly complex society, much more

so than any other intentional community. I also noted earlier that the transpersonal ideals of Auroville serve as a unifying factor; here, I would simply like to make the observation that this complexity—of differentiation in unity—is a crucial factor for evolutionary processes, such as the random emergence of new forms to take place.

An integral evolutionary perspective, such as that of Swimme and Berry (1992), additionally views evolution not just in terms of hierarchical growth with the human species on the top, but also in terms of the interconnections of life. Evolution at all levels manifests a differentiated oneness. Speaking of this, Sarah, a young Dutch-English woman, says:

Spirituality for me is seeing a God, seeing the life force and everything, you know? Saying I am more intelligent than an animal but I am not more important than an animal. I mean, sort of seeing the way that everything is interconnected and has their role to play.

Further elaborating on the idea of how everything has a role, she recounts an experience from her own life where she was out trekking in the mountains with a group and was initially proud of her ability to lead the line of trekkers, but then realized that the ones who chose to bring up the rear had made a similar conscious choice: “It’s all a matter of choice and trying to find where in the line you walk and being satisfied you’re walking there, that’s like yoga.”

Commentators on postsecular spirituality have not particularly commented on the significance of differentiation in unity in a spiritual society though in his study of American grassroots spirituality, Forman (2004) cites Christopher Peck as saying that while spirituality “entails a community . . . everybody’s experience

of the Divine is different” (p. 77). This suggests that spirituality is simultaneously experienced as being both differentiated and unifying.

Specific Characteristics of Auroville as a Spiritual Society

As of yet, commentators on postsecular spirituality have not studied the contours of contemporary spirituality within the context of a particular spiritual path, and have instead constructed their theories based on general observations of mainstream, democratic, Westernized societies. Wilber (1995) and M. King (2004) include an evolutionary dimension in their theories, but, as discussed earlier, the exact trajectory of social evolution is not easily determined and not universally applicable to all cultures. So far I have compared Auroville’s features as a spiritual society with general traits identified by Western theorists in their delineation of a postsecular spirituality. In the remainder of this chapter I would like to analyze Auroville as a spiritual society based on Integral Yoga. The specific characteristics of Auroville as a spiritual society dedicated to Integral Yoga that emerged from my study are (a) being a willing servitor of the Divine consciousness, (b) action of the Divine force, (c) the importance of Matrimandir, (d) the collective aspect of the yoga, (e) the concept of the psychic being, and (f) a philosophy of material transformation.

Being a Willing Servitor of the Divine Consciousness

As seen earlier, a central tenet of this evolutionary path is the belief in a transcendental and immanent Divine working in oneself and in the world, to bring about a spiritual evolution both in the individual and in society. It could be noted here that both in its practice and philosophy, Integral Yoga does away with

narcissistic experientialism that has, as Ferrer (2002) points out, vexed the movement of transpersonal psychology. Apart from D describing his first meeting with the Mother, none of my informants detailed transpersonal experiences even when directly asked what spirituality meant to them. To be a willing servitor of the Divine essentially means to forego one's own ambitions and desire for transpersonal experiences or personal growth and merely play the part that one feels individually called by the Divine to play.

This aspect of surrendering or sacrificing one's own interests to the Divine is an important practice in the yoga, so much so that one person, abdicating her own free will in joining Auroville, writes: "I feel I didn't really choose to live here—rather I have to live here and I surrender" (Appendix E). For another Aurovilian, psychologically, being a willing servitor of the Divine is not so much of a matter of surrendering to the Divine will as of aspiring to understand and fulfill it. He writes: "It [Auroville] fulfills a dream, a desire to rise to the Divine's imagination of how our lives should be in Auroville" (Appendix E). Still another Aurovilian speaks of the joy that one gets in a life devoted to service and at the same time seems to admit that one may not always fully understand the Divine Will. She/he writes: "It is wonderful to feel oneself as an instrument in the hands of the Divine. It is humiliating to be a puppet by Grace" (Appendix E).

There is also a widely prevalent belief in Auroville that, when one does not voluntarily surrender to the Divine's Will, one gets knocks and blows in one's life that teach one to go within, identify and detach from one's egoistic motives. Carol claims that, even though human experiences and challenges are probably

similar whether one is in the West or in Auroville, she experiences life more intensely here, where both the peaks and troughs are higher and deeper respectively. There also seems to be a general agreement that it is through personal and interpersonal challenges that one grows. Jean, a casual informant, explained this to me by saying that he left his comfortable life in France because he was “not experiencing anything directly, cocooned in a sheltered life . . . Here, I constantly interact with others in our common effort to build the city, and these interactions are often challenging. But I grow through these challenges” (personal communication, October 31, 2007). Sarah, too, comparing her days in Europe with Auroville, attests to the same thing:

Auroville, I think, is more difficult because you have more confrontations on things with yourself, so it's more frustrating because in Europe you can easily just follow the pattern of life; you don't have to deal with those things. Whereas here in Auroville—Auroville has a tendency to [say] ‘Oh, you're uncomfortable with that. Hoppa! A situation where you have to deal with that.’

I surmise that because of Auroville's spiritual ideals, Aurovilians have both the time and the will to reflect on their life and experiences more deeply and to grow from that. Carol additionally feels that there is some energy at work here, which puts you in challenging situations and thus forces you to grow. She specifically explains that once you join Auroville, you are forced to confront the very situation that you wanted to avoid in yourself and in your life. Sonia, agreeing to this, recounts how she had given up her job in England because she did not like a particular colleague but when she came to Auroville, she had to share her living space with that person:

Not physically the same person, but exactly the thing that I had run away from; that was so striking—so, what is your help then—you can try to change your circumstances or you can try and do it the Yoga way and say that this is for my good and for my growth . . . and calmly offer it to the Mother.

Sometimes, of course, Auroville's very size forces these interpersonal encounters. Carol describes how difficult and painful it was for her to separate from her husband and the father of her two children, because she would encounter him at parties, or at homes of mutual friends, or just in taking care of their children. She says:

In the West, when this kind of thing happens. . . actually there is not that direct interaction all the time in all these different situations as much. So it is easier to pretend that you worked it out. So yeah, this is part of the intensity [in Auroville] but in the end it's good.

Here, it can be pointed out that there is always a transpersonal factor in people's relationships in Auroville. In this example, it is Carol's and her ex-husband's love for Auroville that keeps both of them here and forces them to work out their personal issues.

Finally, whether or not Aurovilians are right about the action of a force that compels them to grow, their approach to take challenges in a positive light and to try to work through them with equanimity is psychologically healthy. This force is often specifically identified as the Mother's force, and this notion is examined in more detail below.

Action of the Divine Force

Even though the supramental transformation is a unique aspect of Integral Yoga, Aurovilians interestingly do not seem to obsess about this futuristic reality. Only one out of 131 survey respondents mentioned the word "supramental" in their

responses, and none of my interviewees did so, even when specifically asked about their understanding of spirituality. As Habermas (1979) observed about the modern culture in general, spirituality in Auroville focuses less on metaphysical assertions about the world and more on individual integration. Upon breaking down the information collected from 131 survey responses into manageable sub-units of data and categorizing and analyzing them, I found that a total of 80 sub-units centered on personal factor, 38 on interpersonal factors and 55 around transpersonal factors (Appendices E & F). Even the responses that suggested the transpersonal realm were not metaphysical assertions about a transcendental truth but were couched in a language that indicated that the transpersonal was personally and experientially approached.

In contradistinction, however, many Aurovilians mentioned their belief in, or their experience of, the Mother's force, which can be equated with the Supramental Force. In Integral Yoga the Mother is regarded as a personal embodiment of the Divine,^{lvii} and Sri Aurobindo specifically mentions that the Divine is more easily accessible in this form of a human persona rather than as an impersonal evolutionary force. While attitudes towards the Mother greatly vary even among those Aurovilians who specifically believe her to be a Divine being, what is common is that each, in his or her own individual way, seeks a relationship with her or her disembodied presence. In D's life, that first meeting with the Mother was unique in its transformational power, and while he seeks to recreate the depth and peace of that powerful moment on his own through meditations, or in his interactions with others, nothing so far is comparable to that

singular event. D consequently doubts others when they claim about having a personal connection to the Mother without ever having met her. B seeks to maintain his relationship to her by laboriously copying her or Sri Aurobindo's words in calligraphy. Yet another informant, Jean, who had met the Mother, shared that what keeps him in Auroville, despite current challenges, "is the Mother" (personal communication October 31, 2007). For Jean, as I gathered from further questioning, the Mother symbolizes the evolutionary drive within him that seeks individual and collective development. This transmutation of the Mother as a human figure to an impersonal force is evident from an anecdote that Jean relates:

On the morning of November 18, 1973, I got the news that the Mother had passed away the previous evening. The news was shocking. None of us had ever expected it. Aurovilians were flocking to the Ashram that morning for a last *darshan* of the Mother. For a moment, I was shaken and undecided, and then I clearly felt that Mother wanted me to do her work and not to worship her. And so I continued as usual with my planned work for the day—concreting the floor of my workshop (personal communication October 31, 2007).

For practitioners of Integral Yoga the most expeditious way to develop or evolve oneself is to simply remain open to this evolutionary force of the Mother and to have faith that it will work things out in the proper manner and in the proper time. Integral Yoga views the individual's relationship to the Divine in co-creative and participatory ways, but the Divine, being omnipotent, is seen as being vastly more powerful than the human persona. In short, the fastest and safest path to spiritual growth in Integral Yoga is to remain open to the working of the Divine force from above (Sri Aurobindo, 1972a). In my study, the Mother's

force was mentioned both as a spiritual belief and as a transpersonal experience, as indicated by the following seven responses:

I am grateful that Mother and Sri Aurobindo have created Auroville and continue to support and guide it and that I am given the possibility to live and work here.

I feel very grateful . . . to have met the Mother. I . . . thank Mother for having led me here.

I am happy and content. I always feel the presence of The Mother.

Auroville is the physical manifestation of the Mother's Dream and I feel favored to be in Auroville.

It is grace even just to live in Auroville. Feeling that this is the Mother's project.

I was "touched" by the Mother in 1972. The yoga of Sri Aurobindo keeps inspiring me.

I like to live in the Presence. The presence of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, the presence of the Auroville spirit; no place elsewhere can give us that kind of nourishment and safety on a subtle level. (Appendix E)

Also as evident from the above responses, this force or presence of the Mother not only greatly adds to people's sense of psychological well-being in terms of feeling grateful, happy, content and inspired, but is also seen as being necessary for spiritual progress. In the *Letters to Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo (1970) speaks of the dangers that can be present on the higher, subtle, spiritual planes as one proceeds on the path, and an absolute reliance on Mother's force is seen as being crucial to safely navigating one's way through these levels. A few Aurovilians, represented by the six responses below, mention the force in impersonal, general terms rather than explicitly identifying it as the Mother's Force:

To live in Auroville is to be an instrument in the hands of the Spirit of Auroville, which is dynamically active behind all that happens in Auroville.

It is indeed a place where one can feel that there is something beyond human organizational power.

I feel “something” in the land of Auroville. I feel that “something” more at Matrimandir, Savitri Bhavan and in the forest area of Auroville.

The inevitable feeling that the Divine is close though it lives very heavily masked.

The power radiating all over Auroville.

This place is being guided by a conscious force. (Appendix E)

Because she specifically said so, many Aurovilians believe that the Mother has placed her force on Auroville, which acts as a protective field for the experiment. Beliefs, such as these are quite common: “The high power put by ‘Mother’ . . . it gives support and evolution” (Appendix E). As stated by Sri Aurobindo (1970), not all are seen as being capable of withstanding and assimilating the power of this force as evidenced from comments, such as this: “the guidance of the Mother is very strong here, and it’s quite something to get used to” (Appendix E).

The Importance of the Matrimandir

One cannot emphasize enough the importance of the Matrimandir—the monumental sacred edifice at the very centre of the city—in the collective life of Auroville. Aurovilians believe that the Matrimandir is “a kind of dynamo for channeling and directing the Force of the Great Mother to support the development of Auroville and the transformation of the world” (Van Vrekhem, 2000, p. 524). Many see it as a “central Force of Auroville, the cohesive Force”

(Alfassa, 1980, p. 349) that somehow holds together the loosely-bound, disperse society of Aurovilians. In the early, pioneering years, the Matrimandir literally helped in building solidarity among the Aurovilians, for most of them physically and collaboratively worked at its construction site. Often the whole community was consulted or their opinion solicited on diverse proposals about the finishing details of the building. As with many other pioneering projects of Auroville, the lack of skills or technical knowledge to construct a building of such a magnitude did not deter Aurovilians, and the repetitive, manual work of construction often took on a numinous quality. The late Ruud Lohman, an Aurovilian who was known for his dedication to constructing the Matrimandir, describes the digging of the immense crater for its foundation thus: “We dug on and on, for nobody digs to dig a hole, but just to dig in one’s subconscious—to carry things up, to bring them into clear daylight, to organize them” (as cited in Sullivan, 1994, p. 112). To give a sense of the charged quality that physical work had for these Aurovilians, I quote at length from an article by another Aurovilian, Tim Wrey, who describes a particular day’s work at the Matrimandir. The sudden insight that he gains about the nature of this collective work has the force of a spiritual revelation:

When I arrived I found an atmosphere of quietly dedicated activity in all directions. Men and women of all nationalities and ages were involved in shoveling stones, emptying cement sacks, manning the concrete mixer, pushing trolleys of concrete mix and attaching them to hoists.

They communicated in a variety of languages, or in silence, their smiles and integrated action being all that was required to carry the work forward stage by stage. Everywhere there was a radiance and sense of common purpose. . . .

Nobody to my knowledge was doing anything exceptionally skilled or special, yet the Matrimandir was clearly progressing . . . suddenly I understood.

The truth burst upon me with all its beauty and simplicity, as I realized that there could be no such thing as a “significant contribution” except in the context of my own ego. . . .

Only by everyone working together and each contributing his humble part to the whole, and doing it to the highest standards, could the Matrimandir be built. It progressed through unity, and to work on it was to learn the lesson of unity. (Wrey, 1976, as cited in Sullivan, 1994, p. 122-23).

Over the years, the number of Aurovilians engaged in the building of the Matrimandir has significantly decreased, but as Doris (2007) relates, the old-timers (people who have lived in Auroville for a long time) who worked at the Matrimandir fondly remember those times as being truly special.

It is not unusual in the life history of intentional communities that in the early phases of a community’s development, the construction of a building should take on such symbolic significance. An architectural project focuses and symbolizes the very value of a community (Abrams & McCullough, 1976). Van Wormer (2004) further maintains that religious groups deliberately promote material symbols, such as sacred buildings, to foster commitment and allegiance among the members. Undoubtedly the Matrimandir is a material symbol that, more than anything else in Auroville, has played a role in promoting *communitas* and commitment among Aurovilians, but what is significantly different about the Matrimandir, as compared to the promotion of material culture in other intentional communities, is that the vast majority of the funds for building it has come from outside Auroville. For these donors, most of whom are Indian disciples of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the importance of Matrimandir transcends the significance of the development of Auroville itself. As Gilles, an Aurovillian currently on the management group of Matrimandir, explains, these donors

periodically visit Matrimandir but do not really express an interest in other aspects of Auroville or even care to stay in its guest houses. (personal communication, Oct 27, 2007). For Aurovilians and non-Aurovilians alike, however, physically and/or monetarily helping in the construction of the Matrimandir is to take part in, what architectural historian Lindsay Jones calls, “ritual-architectural events” and “ceremonial . . . situations that bring people and buildings into active interaction” (2000, p. xxviii).

The sanctity of the Matrimandir was of course bestowed by the Mother herself. Over the years, from 1965-1973, the Mother spoke at length about the Matrimandir and its spiritual significance, indicating that it would be a place meant “for concentration . . . with a view to try to finding one’s consciousness” (Gilles, 2004, p. 25). Many Aurovilians attest that meditating in the inner chamber of Matrimandir is a unique experience. For example, one survey respondent wrote: “my attachment is to the “Matrimandir Chamber”. I realize the high presence in the chamber; every sitting is a new experience to me. This is amazing, which keeps me in Auroville” (Appendix E). Another Aurovilian, decrying religious attitudes towards Matrimandir, cryptically said it was a place for “individual initiation” (personal communication, October 31, 2007).

Perhaps given the Mother’s comment (1980) that the Matrimandir is a shrine to the principle of the Divine creative energy, some Aurovilians do not distinguish between the Matrimandir as a physical building and the presence of the Mother, as when a survey respondent equates the two in a single paragraph: “The Matrimandir as the soul of Auroville is my ‘home.’ I simply would not wish

to be anywhere else on earth but here; near Her” (Appendix E). For others, the place offers a spiritual refuge, as when E told me that whenever she is disappointed with Aurovilians or frustrated by problems, she goes and sits in the inner chamber. For others the Matrimandir stands as a reminder that one is in Auroville for a spiritual purpose. Three Aurovilians mentioned that what they liked about Auroville was:

Time and space and Matrimandir which is given to contemplate the Divine play.

That the Divine is at the Centre, the Matrimandir.

All... (almost!) Matrimandir, the spirit of Auroville, the growing “sangha-Deva” [spiritual community]. (Appendix E)

And finally, a few deeply believe in the Mother’s words (1980) that upon its completion, the Matrimandir would somehow help Aurovilians. Jonas, who has been here 22 years, mentioned to me that he felt there was a subtle and growing sense of a spiritual collective in Auroville, which he was sure would come to the fore once the Matrimandir was completed (personal communication, September 24, 2007).

Despite the tremendous significance that the Matrimandir has for a number of Aurovilians who either have deeply held beliefs about or participate in transpersonal experiences while meditating in the inner chamber, it would be erroneous to assume that this significance is universally shared by all. Only a small proportion of Aurovilians regularly meditate in the chamber. On two separate occasions, an Aurovilian shared that he found the atmosphere of the inner chamber to be “cold and sterile” (personal communication, September 15,

2007), while another woman felt that it was “artificial” (personal communication, November 24, 2007). This does not automatically mean that these Aurovilians do not have a connection to the Mother as a transcendental force, for the same woman who found the Matrimandir “artificial” mentioned how much she cherished the tangible vibration of “love and warmth” that she felt at the Samadhi—Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s tomb in Pondicherry (personal communication, November 24, 2007). A few bolder ones have publicly lampooned, in satiric plays and poems (see for example, Fator, 1998), what they perceive to be blind, religious attitudes towards the Matrimandir.

The Collective Aspect of the Yoga

In his typology of the spiritual impulse, M. King draws up several categories, including a social category, and suggests, “Perhaps 90% of any population are drawn to a social form of spiritual life, meaning the collective practices and communitarian elements of religion” (2004, p. 12). While M. King’s view espouses a common understanding of the social form of spirituality as the congregation or *sangha* of believers and practitioners, I would like to point out that the 2,000-odd community of Auroville is not such a *sangha*, in that there are absolutely no common practices that are shared by everyone in the community. There is a shared perception of what it means to be an Aurovilian, and this shared identity gives rise, as examined in Chapter 5, to a feeling of *communitas*.

The societies that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother set up, namely the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville, are different from monastic groups and Buddhist *sanghas*, which are based around collective intentions and practices.

While such communities undoubtedly benefit the people who comprise them, Sri Aurobindo felt that though such spiritual communities reached out to the masses, “they tended merely towards, ‘the creation of the religious temperament, the most outward form of spirituality’” and were thus incapable of effecting the spiritual and supramental change in humanity that was the goal of his yoga (Heehs, 2000, p. 217).

At the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, in order to keep the power of the spirit alive, “[Sri] Aurobindo tried to steer it away from the conventionalism he observed in past and present spiritual communities. He avoided setting rules, discouraged mechanical observances, and abjured proselytism” (Heehs, 2000, p. 217). Similarly, in the context of Auroville, the Mother repeatedly clarified that both the process and the goal of a collective ideal had to be worked out by each individual in his or her own way. As she stated: “one of the most common types of human collectivity [is] to group together . . . around a common ideal . . . but in an artificial way. In contrast to this . . . a true community can be based only on the inner realization of each one of its members” (Alfassa, 1979, p. 107). Oliver too, attests that while the diversity of views among Aurovilians is fine, for the collective to form there has to be a “true base”:

I mean, not everybody comes to Auroville for the same reason. But those who come to Auroville for that base reason, this is the connecting fiber which is always there and which carries, to a certain extent, what we are doing here. Then the outer collective life is less important for me; it has its expression, yeah OK, we care for each other and we are carrying everybody along and fine. That is ultimately part of the exercise also. But I think the first thing is to have this underlying thing, which is binding us.

Wexler suggests that “against the disorientation, decathexis, and desensitization that characterize modernity and postmodernity, the emerging form of life in a mystical society is characterized by unification rather than dispersion” (2000, p. 3). My analysis of Auroville reveals that while, because of the immense freedom granted to individuals, there is a certain element of differentiation and dispersion in Auroville, the common belief in Auroville’s transpersonal ideals acts as a unifying factor. In my interviews, both Swaminathan, an Aurovilian from the local village, and Oliver, an Austrian Aurovilian, mentioned how their brothers just could not comprehend why they work at menial jobs in Auroville instead of building successful, financial careers. As opposed to the alienation he thus feels from his brother, Oliver continued, “when I meet an Aurovilian abroad, outside of Auroville, I feel immediately that this person is family even though I may not know him at all, or on some occasion or the other may have quarreled with him/her.”

My interviewees, however, resisted my reducing the unifying factor of Auroville to a matter of belief in ideals. While they admitted that it was difficult to define it exactly, Sonia mentioned that there is an “underlying, all embracing reality” to Auroville. Swaminathan elaborated, “I mean that’s the energy of the whole place around here. . . I don’t feel one necessarily has to say it’s the ideals that are pushing, but [it is] pretty much the Auroville vibe.” For Carol, it is this energy that supports and sustains Auroville:

There’s this support underneath everything and once you’ve experienced that. I mean, maybe when you’re very new and you haven’t had that experience, yet you feel like it’s all sort of scattered and you wonder, how are all these people going to come together for anything? But once you’ve

had this experience, at least once, then you realize that that's there all the time. It's underneath you all the time.

At the focus group interview, the interviewees concurred though that the bonding among Aurovilians partly comes from a shared, common passion for Auroville and the commitment that one shows in working for it. Contrasting this to his recent experience at a Buddhist retreat centre, Swaminathan pointed out that each day there was a group that came together and meditated together, but for the rest of the day, the members of the group were busy with their individual pursuits, while in contrast in Auroville, “even if we never meditate together, all day long, in our different ways, we are working voluntarily for one common purpose.” He concludes that there is “collective karma yoga” in Auroville—a constant awareness of the common aim of Aurovilians that makes his interpersonal relationships in Auroville concretely different from those outside.

Carol points out that in Auroville, as elsewhere, there is personal growth and self-development, but at the same time “it's a recognition that they are giving something to the larger cause, to the people they know or don't know: for the good of the community in some small or big way.” For Swaminathan, this embodied sense of living for a higher purpose with a group of people, over and above one's own personal gain, is the main difference between living in Auroville and outside. Swaminathan likens it to a group body that he trusts and that holds him and everything else together. Carol emphasizes that this collective feeling is very subtle, because there is not a single activity or practice which brings all Aurovilians together. She adds that she appreciates the fact that there are no mandatory collective rituals, meditations or the like in Auroville, but these are left

to the individual's choice. It is not a collectivity based on uniformity but based on differentiation, because people are at different stages of their growth.

For Sonia, a collective yoga of necessity means that the greater majority of people should have some spiritual qualities, such as equanimity and detachment, and here she feels Auroville is not yet at that level. However, she agrees that the collective aspect of Auroville is something, which has slowly evolved over the years:

For so many years the focus had to be on the physical; then came up some vital developments. It started culturally, then it sort of became something else. I think since quite a while, maybe 6-8 years there's gradually been this switch on more of a mental level to study, understand, to communicate, to go into things together. . . . So there is some kind of evolution like that and . . . actually if it continues, if we can go on fostering it, it might cause a breakthrough to something that you could call a collective yoga. But at the moment, if there's any collective yoga going on it's an unconscious one, it's not a conscious one.

Philosophy of Material Transformation

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had a radical vision that, in the course of evolution, physical matter itself would undergo a supramental change and exhibit new properties.^{lviii} To help bring about this transformation, the Mother enjoined on the Aurovilians to consciously engage with matter, and to not treat matter as being dead or inert, but to recognize it as incarnate spirit. An Aurovilian who is a self-taught designer, architect, and constructor, told me that what he sought was “the impossible, for what is possible is already done. And nothing is impossible in matter” (personal communication, October 31, 2007).

Given this world-affirming philosophy that seeks material transformation as opposed to liberation from the world, Aurovilians are actively engaged in

improving the degraded physical environment and impoverished social conditions of their bioregion. Auroville has won acclaim for its efforts in reclaiming over 2,500 acres of wasteland, planting over two million trees, restoring the indigenous forest type, and promoting organic agriculture, renewable energy systems and appropriate building technologies. While all Aurovilians are not committed to a sustainable lifestyle, the average ecological awareness and concern exhibited by Aurovilians is far greater than I have seen in the more affluent mainstream societies of India and USA. The passion for environmental sustainability in Auroville is matched by an equal concern over the lack of basic facilities, such as drinking water, health care, education, and income-generating opportunities in the villages that surround Auroville. To that end, over a dozen rural outreach units in Auroville have worked to make primary health care, water and sanitation facilities available in 17 villages, provided educational facilities and women's empowerment programs in 40 villages, and sought, although I may add far less unsuccessfully, to promote environmentally sustainable farming practices in about a dozen villages. (Auroville Project Coordination Group, 1999). Because of their innovations in renewable energy systems, appropriate building technologies, and environmental regeneration, many Aurovilians and Auroville units, at the invitation of other institutions, have also actively participated in other similar efforts in India. At a general collective level, such socially engaged efforts in creating a better world can be seen, as Ferrer (2002) suggests, as being eminently spiritual, but at a personal and individual level, a more detailed, phenomenological study would needed to be conducted to ensure that the social

and environmental practices of Aurovilians do not lead to subtle forms of egoism. As Sri Aurobindo (1972a) cites, there are innumerable ways, on the spiritual path, that can lead to the aggrandizement of the ego. While this issue has not been the focus of my study, one of my informants, Swaminathan, not only elaborated on his understanding of spirituality as helping the immediate local, village community and through it the world, but he did so in ways that attested to his own passion for being an instrument in that collective process rather than an egoistic being who took pride in his role of uplifting the masses.

The Concept of the Psychic Being

In the data I collected none of the Aurovilians allude to the discovery of the psychic being—our true and unique individual self—which is a core concept of Sri Aurobindo’s teachings.^{lix} However, in consonance with Sri Aurobindo’s writings about the psychic being is the belief that each one of us has a unique gift to offer to the world. This belief is voiced in Swaminathan’s assertion, “my thing is teaching, I don’t want to do anything else.” Finding this gift and offering it for the service of the Divine and the community is regarded as part of the yoga. Jean explained to me how each architect in Auroville is uniquely talented in one particular area—one in design and layout, one in appropriate building technologies, one in the details of finishing and so on—but each one egoistically thinks that they are equipped to take up a whole architectural project. He says:

If they could all come together to design and build the city that would be the mark of true collectivity. We are here to be servitors of the Divine and not of our egos. It is only when we offer our gifts to the Divine’s work; we transform our egos and access our true psychic nature. (personal communication, October 31, 2007)

Such a conscious, collective effort would perhaps be the decisive first step towards a spiritual society based on the realization of the oneness of all that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother envisioned. For while there are a significant number of individuals in Auroville who, instead of having a materialistic outlook on life, are governed by spiritual motives, they are as of yet too individualistic in their practices to embody the ideal of fraternity that Sri Aurobindo (1970) speaks of.

I concur with both Sri Aurobindo (1971) and Wilber (1995) that social evolution is a complex, multidimensional process and that one can speak of it only in broad, general terms. Nevertheless there are an increasing number of social scientists and thinkers who attest to the continued evolution of the human being as a social being. To this body of literature, on the basis of my case study of Auroville, I would like to promulgate the view that the development of societies follows the same general evolutionary principles identified by systems theory. As of yet, social scientists have not explicitly analyzed the development of societies on the basis of the evolutionary principles of diversity, complexity, self-organization and random fluctuations, which can potentially trigger the emergence of new forms and structures. The power of the self-reflexive mind and the “guiding images” that it embraces, first pointed out by Markley and Harman (1974/1982) has also not been adequately taken into consideration by social evolutionary theories. By focusing on the transpersonal ideals of Auroville and examining how they are translated into reality in the socio-psychological dynamics of the community, this study corroborates Markley’s (1976) and Jantsch’s (1980) theory that such guiding images can have a tremendous effect in

furthering social evolution. As a result of my qualitative study, I conclude that the attitudes that Aurovilians exhibit mark them to be among the forerunners of the emergent postsecular spiritual society described by Griffin (1988) and Wexler (2000).

Challenges That Auroville Faces

The Danger of Spiritual Bypassing and Other Obstacles to Growth

As mentioned earlier, the fundamental tenet of Integral Yoga is the evolutionary action of a Divine force that is at once transcendent and immanent. The danger of this path is that people can delude themselves and indulge in what Welwood identifies as *spiritual bypassing*, where people “try to avoid or prematurely transcend basic human needs, feelings, and development tasks” (1984, p. 64). Cortright, pointing out that spiritually bypassing can take different forms, explains the phenomenon thus: “Spiritual bypassing, which is the use of spiritual ideas and images to bolster psychological defenses, is unavoidable for most without a good deal of psychological awareness. . . . Spiritual bypassing makes virtues of defensive detachment and dissociation” (2007, p. 68). In Auroville, I have observed that spiritual bypassing occurs primarily at a personal level when individuals seek to inauthentically live out their lives according to their own idealized images of spirituality. Instead of acknowledging and taking responsibility for their behavior and actions, they shift the responsibility to a posited Divine force. For instance, a friend of mine, who was having problems in establishing meaningful, intimate relationships, mentioned to me that he felt that the Mother wanted him to remain celibate (personal communication, December

17, 2006). Although it would take a mature counselor to determine if it was spiritual bypassing or not, having been associated with this particular individual and thus having insight into his life, I felt, though naturally I did not say so, that he was indulging in defensive behavior. He was seeking to overcome his basic human needs for intimacy and companionship by resorting to the spiritual ideal of celibacy—an ideal, which was often advocated by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to their disciples in certain specific contexts of spiritual development. To cite another instance, an Aurovilian woman, whom I greatly respected for her maturity and who had recently—at the time of our conversation—lost her husband, confided that she did not feel any sorrow because she continued to feel connected to her partner at an occult level (personal communication, October 13, 2007). In this case, it was impossible for me to gauge the authenticity of her statement. In short, it would be methodologically challenging for a researcher to determine and qualitatively gauge psycho-spiritual traits for their authenticity and depth.

I believe spiritual bypassing can also happen at a collective level if members in a group engage in interpreting the events in their lives according to spiritual ideals that they subscribe to. For instance, many people in Auroville personally interpret the unfolding of their lives, or even the progressive development of Auroville, as evidence of the working of the Mother's Force. When such interpretations are collectively discussed within a group without the validity of the interpretations ever being questioned, then it is possible that individuals in the group mutually strengthen each other's beliefs and collectively indulge in spiritual bypassing. Such a group, as noted earlier in the discussion of

religion and spirituality, could easily regress into a religious cult.^{lx} Again, the shortcoming here is that an outside observer may never be able to distinguish between beliefs born of an individual's experiences and beliefs picked up from the group and unconsciously internalized by the individual.

Along with spiritual bypassing, Welwood mentions *narcissism* and *desensitizing* as the other two obstacles to spiritual growth and development. Welwood defines the narcissistic tendency as "being overly fascinated and absorbed in our own personal process" (1984, p. 65). While such a tendency is perhaps more true of the new age movement that I have observed in the Bay Area of California, in the Auroville context, I find, on the basis of general observations, that narcissism largely takes the shape of an egoistic attitude where Aurovilians, believing in the superiority of the path of Integral Yoga, can often be closed to other avenues of growth. This narcissistic tendency, I believe, also occasionally leads to rudeness to outsiders, as for instance, reported by Pillai (2005).

Desensitizing in Auroville also takes on a different dimension than mentioned by Welwood (1984). For Welwood, desensitizing is a common problem in that many people would rather have an easy life than make the effort to engage in psychospiritual growth. In Auroville, again based on general observations, my feeling is that many Aurovilians, who have been in Auroville on a long-term basis, are desensitized to its considerable and recurrent challenges, such as that of protecting the environment against the development of India, internal economic and organizational challenges and so forth, precisely because they have engaged with these challenges for years on end with little or no success.

As the idealistic, young hippy generation of pioneering Aurovilians who started the project now move into their late fifties and even early sixties, there is a tendency among some of them to disengage from their own personal growth and merely concentrate on objective factors, such as the material building of the city of Auroville. This disengagement also stems from the fact that the path of Integral Yoga, as explained earlier, may not necessarily show observable results of an individual's development, and hence a person on the path can easily feel disheartened and disengage from the practice.

It could be mentioned here that Welwood's (1984) suggestions for countering these obstacles of spiritual bypassing, narcissism and desensitizing are already practiced by Aurovilians in that they are very much grounded on earth, open to high, spiritual ideals and, by virtue of their challenging location in fast-developing rural India, are forced to respond to the world around them. What avenues are then open or could be made available to Aurovilians to help them overcome challenges in their psychospiritual development? The question, of course, presupposes that Aurovilians are invested in individual growth. To be honest, many do not link their engaged participation in Auroville to individual growth and are instead happy to just be of service to the ideals and to the community. Others, as was overwhelmingly evident from the responses of my research participants and examined in this dissertation, are content, in many different ways, in the guidance of a transpersonal force—the Mother's force, as and when they experience it. For many others who feel psychologically blocked in their development, sensitive transpersonal therapists and counselors,

particularly those adept in the discipline of Integral Yoga, could be of immense help, and there is a growing acknowledgement and use of nascent counseling services in Auroville. Finally, I would like to suggest that Aurovilians would greatly benefit from experimenting with peer-based, interpersonal practices as advocated by Bawuens (2007). Certain interpersonal practices, such as Dreamcatching practices that were mentioned earlier and “Insight Dialogue,” a form of Bohemian Dialogue, were or still are in vogue in Auroville among certain groupings with varying degrees of success. Here, I would just like to propose, without detailing normative practices, that in keeping with evolutionary tendencies, Aurovilians experiment in small, autonomous groups, the practice of both connecting to the transpersonal force of the Mother and collectively sharing that in verbal and/or non-verbal ways within the safe, non-judgmental space of their group. Such a group could meet around a specific issue as the Dreamcatchers do, or just to deepen their spiritual practice. Leaders, if any, in such groups, should not be “a fixed authority . . . [so that] individuals are free to explore this guidance” (Bauwens, 2007, p. 38). As noted earlier, there is a marked individualistic tendency in Auroville that often hinders genuine interpersonal communication, and such a peer-based practice, I believe would be in keeping with Sri Aurobindo’s ideas of a spiritual society where the individual stands in differentiated unity in relation to the group and both help each other.^{lxi}

Regression Into Religious Dogmatism

As evolution is a messy, convoluted process, fraught with wrong turns and setbacks (Sri Aurobindo, 1972a; Wilber, 1995), there is always the danger that

instead of progression there is regression. Auroville tends to slip into religious dogmatism where instead of being open and flexible to the working of a spiritual force, instead of acting from their inner spiritual experience, Aurovilians act from their mental understanding of the ideals and a dogmatic adherence to their beliefs. This is more evident in the outer, collective structures than in the personal lives of individuals. Every attempt to collectively organize the economy or governing structures is prefaced by quotes from the Mother, and often sinks into admonitions by groups or individuals of what one should or should not do. So much so that the “Pulse,” an electronic medium to solicit the views of the community, once conducted a poll in 2002 to check if the need to use the Mother’s words was becoming a religion: 64.3% of the people polled replied in the affirmative (Mohanty, 2002). Needless to say, it is not easy to govern such a diverse, collective experiment, and when one does not have access to a deeper spiritual consciousness, faith in Mother’s words becomes necessary for the manifestation of Auroville.

This religious attitude particularly reveals itself in the issue of constructing Matrimandir and town-planning, particularly because Roger Anger, the chief architect of Auroville appointed by the Mother and supported by an influential group of Aurovilians, takes it as his personal responsibility, or even as his religious duty to execute, as faithfully as possible, the Mother’s visions for both the Matrimandir and the layout of the town.^{lxiii} Roger is occasionally opposed by individuals, especially if he seeks to impose solutions that are impractical or have a disastrous environmental impact. One survey respondent, who was obviously

against the current town-plan wrote: “Look at most ‘happening’ cities. Mixed land-use is THE way to go (sorry ma [Mother], I am not a fan of zoning)” (Appendix F). The fact that the respondent, instead of restricting himself/herself to rational arguments, feels it necessary to refer directly to the Mother, shows that he/she is conscious of the power of the Mother’s words in the community, particularly in the context of town planning.

The dogmatism prevalent in town planning was recently carried to an extreme when, in one of their weekly reports, the Working Committee issued a statement to the effect that the lands of Auroville could be sold for the Mother had not said anything to the contrary. It speaks volumes for the Aurovilians’ pragmatic attitude and humor that in subsequent issues of Auroville’s weekly internal communiqué, there was a brilliant cartoon suggesting that we compile a volume of everything that the Mother did not say (Monique, 2007).

This example bears testimony to Pillai’s (2005) observation that even within a single religious group, individuals’ experiences or interpretations of Divinity and Divine texts vary greatly. Asad, deconstructing religious belief, states, “Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretations are endless” (1993, p. 236). I believe the ability to have rational debates on the interpretations of sacred texts, or even on intuited norms of a Divine reality, is a salient characteristic of postsecular or constructive postmodern spirituality. Such rational debates save us both from the numbing relativism of postmodernism and the absolutism of a single, unchangeable, religious truth. They rescue us, as Ferrer (2002) would say, from “the Myth of the Framework”

and the “Myth of the Given.” Carefully distinguishing between the “debilitating nihilism of . . . deconstructing postmodernity” and “the supernaturalism of early modernity,” Griffin further holds that the capability of the human mind to directly, even if imperfectly, experience a Divine reality and its norms “makes it *possible* (emphasis in original) for there to be genuine debate, for there to be rational, cognitive discussion about ethical and aesthetic judgments” (1988, p. 17). Whether Auroville is judged to be a religious group or a nascent spiritual society depends precisely on its willingness to have logical pragmatic discussions on all issues within the larger context of its transpersonal ideals.

The Dangers of Capitalism

A spiritual society, of necessity, can only emerge by countering the materialistic profit-based values of the prevalent capitalistic society. And this by no means is an easy challenge, for “there is an inexorable drive towards rationalization that engulfs *everything* (emphasis in original) about capitalistic societies—even the alternative societies that struggle to emerge within them” (Abrams & McCullough, 1976, p. 218). As an economic system, capitalism is based on the accumulation and growth of capital, which leads to competition for scarce resources. Exchange of goods in the capitalistic system is based on market pricing that follows the law of demand and supply.

As a general evolutionary trend, capitalism has contributed towards increasing differentiation among individuals in that the system rewards individual skills and entrepreneurship and caters to individual choice. However, the differentiation of individuals on the basis of products they consume is merely the

first, though admittedly necessary, step of the individuating process—the process marks the individuation of the personal ego from the undifferentiated, collective mass. But as Nicolescu says, “A consumer does not equal a person, and it is the person who must be in the center of all civilized society” (2002, p. 143). A spiritual society, especially one that is based on Integral Yoga, would need to have economic structures, as seen earlier, that facilitate the growth of the person toward the soul. More importantly, rampant capitalism and a global insatiable market of consumers have brought the world to the brink of an ecological catastrophe. There is an urgent global need for a different economic system, which does not sacrifice social and environmental well-being for the sake of profits. Also, according to the sociologist Fiske’s classification of social structures, the rationale and drive of capitalism stems from “Market Pricing” where social relationships are “mediated by values determined by a market system” (1991, p. 15). Needless to say, impersonal, market-driven social relations are contrary to the “enlightened, intuitive spontaneity of free and fluid association” of the spiritual society envisaged by Sri Aurobindo (1971, p. 291).

While the Auroville economy, starting in the seventies with the hiring of cheap local labor and continuing in the eighties with profit-driven business units, has always been marked by capitalistic trends, the powerful, alienating force of the capitalistic culture has become increasingly evident in Auroville since India’s entry into the globalized market in 1990. In order to emerge more fully as a spiritual society, one that has the potential to be a leading experiment in socio-

cultural evolution, Auroville needs to move beyond capitalism into more cooperative systems.

Certain forms of cooperative systems already exist in Auroville, both as centrally managed systems, such as the “maintenance system” and the “housing fund” and autonomous experiments. Autonomous experiments, which are supported in their transactions by the centrally managed systems, include the joint sharing of incomes among small groups, gift-economic systems where consumers, often anonymously, decide on the price that they want to pay, barter and the use of alternative, virtual currencies that facilitates the exchange of goods and services. Unlike computer-based, peer production processes described by Bauwens, which hold true only for the “*immaterial* [emphasis added] sphere” (2007, p. 36), these alternative and cooperative economic systems of Auroville allow for the creation and exchange of material goods and services. They represent, as Jantsch (1980) would put it, “fluctuations” in the larger system, which can potentially bring about a change. Aurovilians, in my opinion, need to more consciously embrace this process of transformation towards a more socially and environmentally responsible economy by participating in decentralized, self-organized, peer-based groups. Aurovilians would also do well to experiment with “peer governance” as advocated by Bauwens (2007, p. 37). At present, as is common in most cooperative forms of economic sharing, there is a still a marked tendency in Auroville towards centralized organization and hierarchy. While the collective centralized economic structures of Auroville are trustworthy and transparent in their processes, I feel, by their very centralization, they are not in

consonance with the evolutionary process and hinder the growth of the individual. In contrast, peer-based systems foster cooperative individualism—a desirable trait for a society that aspires to reflect a differentiated unity.

Admittedly, if one were to take Sri Aurobindo's (1971) transpersonal view, the current capitalistic phase of Auroville could well be a transitory stage in the evolution of both the human being and society. Sri Aurobindo speaks of how capitalization institutionalized the French revolutionary goal of liberty, while communism institutionalized the second goal of equality, but he says that neither of these ideals can be perfectly achieved till human consciousness changes to truly embody the third revolutionary aim of fraternity:

The union of liberty and equality can only be achieved by the power of human brotherhood and it cannot be founded on anything else. But brotherhood exists only in the soul and by the soul; it can exist by nothing else. (pp. 546-547)

And to establish such a fraternity was precisely the transpersonal ideal of Auroville: "It would be a place where the relations among human beings, usually based almost exclusively upon competition and strife, would be replaced by relations of . . . real brotherhood" (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94). Whether Auroville succeeds in embodying this ideal or not remains to be seen.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION: THE CITY OF THE FUTURE

In writing this dissertation I realize that a recurring theme of my study is the Mother's statement on what it means to be a true Aurovilian:

The first necessity is the inner discovery by which one learns who one really is behind the social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At our inmost centre there is a free being, wide and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the acting centre of our being and our life in Auroville. (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200)

This statement, on the one hand, recognizes the human being as socially constructed and, on the other hand, posits a greater transpersonal identity that needs to be affirmed and embodied by the individual. I explore both of these facets in my study on the social psychology of Auroville, noting the contradictions and the tensions as Aurovilians individually and collectively seek to transcend their social and cultural identities and embrace a transpersonal reality. I also recognize that the spiritual ideals of Auroville, as described by the Mother, exert a continual teleological pull on Aurovilians, both individually and collectively.

Auroville's spiritual ideals point to a transpersonal reality, as of yet not manifested physically. Because these ideals are stated so broadly, and because they appeal to a transpersonal dimension of our lives, Auroville has attracted and continues to attract numerous people from diverse cultures, societies, and educational and economic backgrounds. Auroville has been shaped with the highest intentions, and yet it owes its success to the absence of a constraining, dogmatic developmental blueprint in implementing its intentions. This call, on the one hand, to redefine one's life individually and collectively according to spiritual

values, while on the other, giving the individual the utmost freedom to chart out his or her own life, accounts for a unique social psychology that has been explored in this qualitative research project.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Steps

Auroville, as the Mother's writings make amply clear, is framed by the spiritual tradition of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. The main philosophical tenets of this evolutionary tradition are described in Chapter 2 within the context of other philosophical and scientific theories. By administering a community-wide survey and collating over one hundred responses, as well as conducting in-depth interviews of eleven Aurovilians, I have garnered perspectives from within the community; by analyzing and interpreting these responses, I have sought to describe the social psychology of Auroville to an outside academic audience. My good-willed participation in this project has led me to generate a study that is sensitive to the social culture of Auroville. I fully recognize the fact that a different person with a different, or even a similar, methodology might identify other socio-psychological aspects of Auroville that are not reflected in my study. I myself am aware of whole areas of Auroville's life and culture that did not significantly show up in my data collection and that I had to leave out, given the limitations of my project and its methodology.

Two such areas that I would be interested in exploring in the future would be individual Aurovilians' experiences of the transpersonal realm and the role of the artist in a society that proclaims conscious evolution as its ideal. I came across a preliminary study undertaken by an Aurovilian that sought to

phenomenologically describe the opening of the soul or the psychic being amongst fifteen Aurovilians and people connected to Auroville (Anonymous, 2004). While this study suffers from certain methodological flaws, it nevertheless explores an interesting aspect of life in Auroville—that of the transpersonal experiences of Aurovilians—which I have alluded to, but not fully examined. A qualitative study with a more sensitive methodology than the one I employed, for example, narrative or heuristic methodologies, which could describe the transpersonal experiences of the individuals and relate them to their actions in the community, would more accurately map the social dimension of transpersonal psychology in the context of Auroville than my study has done. Toward the end of my data collection, as a participant-observer I had casual conversations with a couple of artists in Auroville who mentioned that there are certain pre-conceived ideas prevalent in Auroville’s culture about what constitutes good art (based on the Aurobindonian understanding that beauty is an expression of the Divine) that restricts them from expressing themselves more fully, or at least from displaying all of their artistic expressions in public. I found this insight into Auroville’s social psychology fascinating for, as a writer myself, I hold that one of the crucial functions that artists, writers, and intellectuals perform in society is to provide a valid and critical counterpoint to existing social norms. When art conforms to institutionalized morals of beauty, then, in anthropological terms, social dynamics become “a set of ‘performances’ produced by a ‘program’” (V. Turner, 1974, p. 13). As V. Turner points out, it is the “‘liminoid’ genres” in art and literature that by challenging norms of institutionalized behavior allow for the generation of

new metaphors, paradigms and “multiple alternative programs” (p. 14). In evolutionary terms artistic expressions that defy the status quo act as random fluctuations allowing for a system to evolve. In my personal opinion—and I would like to explore this more fully within the context of Auroville—it would be to society’s disadvantage and against the principles of evolution if people felt restricted in the expression of their ideas and values.

In order to better understand the sociological validity and the uniqueness of the Auroville experiment, I compared (in Chapter 4) Auroville to other intentional communities, particularly showing its similarities and differences to both secular communes and religious utopias. I find that Auroville differs radically, both in its structure and in its social psychology, from all other intentional communities—whether they are secular communes, ecovillages or religious utopias. Through this comparison I add to the body of literature on intentional communities. Specifically in Chapter 5, by applying socio-psychological mechanisms operational in communities, namely commitment and *communitas* identified respectively by Kanter (1972) and V. Turner (1969 & 1974), I show the limitations of these frameworks in understanding the social psychology of Auroville. I infer that, at least as demonstrated in Auroville, the generation and interpretation of socio-psychological meanings, subjectively and intersubjectively, is of a greater importance in the formation and cohesiveness of societies than societal structures that are imposed from without. In this context, I agree with V. Turner (1969 & 1974) that the state of liminality liberates individuals from acting on the basis of a socially-sanctioned script, but I show

how in Auroville in the absence of communal rituals, liminality is largely a personal and not an interpersonal experience.

In Chapter 5 I also describe Auroville as an experimental society that offers an alternative to the mainstream, particularly in the sociological aspects of work and organization. I find Aurovilians' attitudes towards work to be radically different from those of mainstream society, an attitude perhaps best summarized in Auroville's ideal that: "Work would not be there as the means of gaining one's livelihood, it would be the means whereby to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service to the whole group" (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94). Also in this chapter, following Tajfel's (1974) lead I elaborate on certain aspects of social identity in Auroville. Because, unlike mainstream social psychologists, I hold a transpersonal view of human nature, and because intentional communities are generally overlooked in mainstream social psychology, I believe my case study of the social psychology of Auroville makes a unique contribution to this academic discipline. I particularly describe how Aurovilians, inspired by their transpersonal ideals, struggle to transcend their personal, socially constructed identity to embrace a wider and more comprehensive sense of self.

Such processes mark Auroville as a nascent spiritual society; a premise I explore in Chapter 6 through framing my research findings in the context of a growing body of literature on postsecular spirituality and social evolution. I describe both generalized and specific characteristics of Auroville that clearly indicate it to be a postsecular spiritual society. I also point out how, both in its

ideals and in its development over four decades, Auroville is characterized by the interrelated evolutionary processes of self-organization, differentiation, unity, and random fluctuations that allow for the emergence of novel structures. While other social scientists and theorists, such as Jantsch (1980), Laszlo (1987), Russell (1995), and Wilber (1995), make general allusions to scientific evolutionary theory in their discussion of the development of societies, none so far, either theoretically or qualitatively, have actually rigorously analyzed societies from this perspective. In my study of Auroville I found its self-organizing principle to be most powerfully indicated by the fact that leadership in Auroville is decentralized—despite a pointed question that asked people to name Aurovilians who had made a significant contribution to Auroville, no clear leaders emerged from the survey, with one respondent specifically citing that on different occasions, different people rose to take lead in directing the community. The differentiated unity of Auroville is evident from the fact that over a one thousand adults from forty different countries, cultures and economic classes subscribe to this experiment. My research indicated that Aurovilians appreciated this diversity with some of them specifically recognizing its evolutionary importance, as when a survey respondent wrote that s/he liked: “the possibilities in the diversity from which one can find her own unique way to grow and contribute to the whole” (Appendix E). I did not particularly seek to tabulate all the random fluctuations that happen in Auroville; I merely noted that the conditions, such as Auroville’s porous borders, its exchanges with the neighboring population and with the rest of the world, and its own complex development over the decades allow for these

random fluctuations to occur. For example, the influx of tourists in recent years have influenced the development of Auroville and forced Aurovilians to more deeply engage with its stated mission of being a city that belongs to humanity. There is a structural increase in the diversity and complexity of Auroville as Aurovilians and tourists interact with one another.

My study particularly sought to explore the relation, if any, between Auroville's spiritual ideals and its social psychology. Here, by demonstrating the positive effect of Auroville's spiritual ideals on its population, I overturn the common but mistaken emphasis on technology in the evolution of societies. As pointed out by Markley (1976) and Jantsch (1980), because of the self-reflexive consciousness of the human being, "guiding images" of a society, such as the spiritual ideals of Auroville, hugely determine its development. As is increasingly recognized in cultural anthropology, human "imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). Along with Griffin (1988), Wexler (2000), and Wilber (1983), I believe that the next step of evolution is the emergence of a spiritual society. By demonstrating the power of ideals in effecting this next step through my case study on Auroville my work makes an important academic contribution to theories on social evolution. In this context, it is important to underscore the fact that my study does not make a definitive claim about Auroville being a spiritual society. My qualitative data merely indicates that, as a society, Auroville embodies all the properties of an evolutionary system as identified by Dynamic Systems Theory and that therefore it is potentially a

crucible for the growth of human consciousness. To map the growth of human consciousness among Aurovilians, would require more studies with suitable methodologies.

In the future, I would like to build on my work by further researching social evolution from several different perspectives. Firstly, I would like to study social evolution from the perspective of evolutionary processes identified by systems theory in general and complexity theory in particular. Secondly, I would like to investigate, from an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspective, the power of the self-reflexive consciousness in guiding individual and collective development. And finally, I would be interested in researching the theoretical ramifications of the theological belief in the evolutionary action of a Divine force.

I believe that Auroville's philosophy of transformation through engaging life rather than rejecting it, and its experimental and pragmatic outlook secured in transpersonal beliefs about the nature of the human being and society, accounts for its fairly healthy and optimistic social psychology. It has its shadows, practically in all aspects of its social life, as I have examined in my dissertation, and yet, it is encouraging that Aurovilians show some awareness of these social challenges and seek to overcome them. Here, because I highlight the collective shadow, seen in issues of racism, spiritual bypassing, and rampant capitalism, my work is of value to Aurovilians themselves. In the end, like most other qualitative research projects, this study is limited by the time and opportunity for data collection that was available to me. Like most other qualitative research it is also likely that with the passage of time some of my data will become outdated. The

merit of this dissertation is restricted to the specific features of Auroville's social psychology that I have identified and that are recognized to be valid by others, both inside and outside of Auroville.

Auroville as a City

There is one aspect of Auroville that I have touched on but not elaborated upon in my dissertation, and that is Auroville's aspiration to be a city. The Mother (Alfassa, 1980) continually referred to Auroville as town or as a city, variously calling it "a universal town" (p. 193), "a city at the service of Truth" (p. 198), and "the city the Earth needs" (p. 206). There is also an indication that the Mother, while recognizing and accepting the sovereignty of India, wanted Auroville to be politically autonomous.

Autonomous city-states, though few, have definitely been and continue to be part of human history. The ancient city-states of Greece and those of Italy in the renaissance period were highly influential in shaping Western culture and civilization. Even when they were part of a larger nation-state, cities, by concentrating people within a small area, have acted as crucibles where social, cultural and political innovations were forged.

Auroville's aspiration to be a city has contemporary significance in that, starting in 2007, human beings have become an urban species with more than 50% of the human population now living in towns and cities (Satterthwaite, 2007). The urbanization of the modern nation is directly linked to greater literacy, higher life-expectancy and a stronger, local democracy (Satterthwaite, 2007). While the current global society is linked through the internet and other

technological means, it is the city that acts as the physical locus of this society. Winter, in his study of global citizenship, notes that the trajectories of migrant labor are not so much between nations as between cities in different nations, pointing out the rising importance of the metropolitan identity: “Metropolitan identities are the ties binding members of experienced communities, people who can see the cityscape in which they and their neighbors live, even more palpably than can the citizens of the imagined communities of the nation” (2006, p. 201). Exploring instances of trans-national political and social activism, Winter recognizes that the growing importance of cities challenges our earlier concepts of national identities and nation-states. While, as Winter points out, the global community draws its inspiration from idealistic utopian visions, economic activity still determines the formation and existence of cities (Satterthwaite, 2007). Needless to say as long as humans are forced to primarily define their identity as economic beings who have to secure a living, they will not be able to fully embrace a transpersonal identity.

In this respect, Auroville, though not unique, is a rare example of a city that privileges spirituality over the economic activity. Even though Auroville does not yet have the population of a town, the purpose of my study begs the question: “How does the social psychology of a city differ from that of an intentional community?” As mentioned earlier, firstly, a city allows for a greater diversity of people than is possible in an intentional community; secondly, a city allows for a greater range of human activities and interactions than would be feasible in a commune or a village: Aurovilians live and work in Auroville, which is not the

case in many communes where residents have to work outside to earn their livelihood. Thirdly, a city is the smallest collective unit that encompasses all the activities that human beings can engage in. These facts alone meet the requirements for the operation of Teilhard de Chardin's "cosmic law of complexity-consciousness" (1955/1999, p. 216) that underlies all evolution.

To elaborate in evolutionary terms, a city is arguably the smallest human settlement that allows for the complexity necessary for the onset of evolutionary process of random fluctuations that can lead to the emergence of new structures. Specifically, Auroville, given its diversity of nationalities and cultures, its porous borders, its complex exchanges with the surrounding population, its emphasis on individual freedom and resistance to authoritarian structures, allows for random fluctuations that cannot be totally predicted or controlled by its governing structures. As noted earlier, by virtue of its location within the nation-state of India and as envisioned by the Mother, Auroville is forced to confront the developmental challenges of India: poverty, social inequality and injustice, population pressure on the land, the rise of capitalism and its attendant social ills, and the crippling bureaucratic machinery of the government. The value of Auroville as a social experiment for all of humanity is directly linked to its location in the developing world of India. India, as noted earlier, forces Aurovilians to confront all the problems that humanity faces today.

Additionally, there is a transpersonal element enshrined in Auroville's very aim to be a city. By encouraging people to engage in all of life's activities not from personal and economic motives but in the spirit of yoga for a higher

collective good, Auroville engenders a spiritual transformation of human life. The historian Lewis Mumford, known for his critique of urban architecture, similarly conceives of cities as spaces that allow for the growth of consciousness:

Before modern man [sic] can gain control over the forces that now threaten his very existence, he must reassume possession of himself. This sets the chief mission for the city of the future: that of creating a visible regional and civic structure, designed to make man at home with his deeper self and his larger world attached to images of human nature and love.

We must now conceive the city, accordingly, not primarily as a place of business or government, but as an essential organ for expression and actualizing the new human personality—that of the ‘One World Man’.

...

The final mission of the city is to further man’s conscious participation in the cosmic and historic process. Through its own complex and enduring structure, the city vastly augments man’s ability to interpret these processes and take an active, formative part in them, so that every phase of the drama it stages shall have, to the highest degree possible, the illumination of consciousness, the stamp of purpose, the color of love.

(1961, pp. 574-576)

I believe, as Mumford envisages, Auroville as a city has tremendous potential to actualize a “new human personality.” A human personality who, in the words of Nicolescu, embraces its “cosmic dimensions” (2002, p. 150) and affirms its inherent transnational character as an inhabitant of planet Earth.

It should not be overlooked, however, that cities too have their shadow aspects. Most cities grow by sucking the population and the resources of the bioregion to feed the gigantic insatiable capitalistic ambitions of corporations. The disasters of urban sprawl, the destruction of ecosystems and agricultural land, the social problems of corruption, violence and economic inequality, are legion in the annals of environmental and social activism against urbanization, but as Satterthwaite (2007) notes, such social and environmental problems are largely

due to bad governance. On the positive side, cities have a smaller environmental impact, and because the population is concentrated in a smaller area in the cities, basic human needs can be met at a significantly lower cost.

Aurovilians too, in the building of their city, seek to balance the ills and gains of urbanization. As with much else in Auroville, efforts toward social and environmental justice have been undertaken largely by individuals rather than by centralized institutions. In terms of caring for its bioregion rather than exploiting it, Auroville's most significant achievement has been to regenerate the land to the extent that it now supports an estimated 30,000 people, who otherwise, as per the Indian government's assessment in 1976, would have been forced to vacate the land (Auroville Project Coordination Group, 1998). In terms of protecting the environment, it is to the credit of Aurovilians, that they envision Auroville as being a city with over 50% green spaces in the form of forests, farms and parks. In terms of human consciousness, some *greenbelter* Aurovilians show a remarkable concern for the well-being of the animals that have begun to populate Auroville's young forests. I particularly remember how when I asked a forester for advice on planting my garden with indigenous species, he conceived a concrete plan involving the whole neighborhood that would allow animals to safely go from one part of the city to the other without having to cross roads and risk being run over by motorized traffic. My partner, too, once refused to mow the overgrown grass in my garden, pointing out how the long grass was crucial in protecting the soil, the microbes, the insects and other fauna. Such awareness for life on earth among city dwellers, I believe, is a rare phenomenon. One can hope

that the emerging global community, after having secured human rights, women's rights, and environmental rights (Winter 2006), will see the importance of protecting all living and non-living beings of the Earth community. In the context of Auroville, it needs to be mentioned that not all Aurovilians show such heightened environmental awareness, and throughout its history, there has been a healthy debate between what are colloquially referred to as *greenbelters* and *city-wallahs* (city-dwellers) about the exact vision and execution of the proposed city. It also needs to be mentioned that there are serious environmental concerns that the land of Auroville does not have the carrying capacity to host the envisaged population of 50,000.

In terms of social psychology, the act of building a city for the Divine brings people together for a supreme collective purpose that is much greater than their own personal aims. It gives a practical direction to Auroville as “an experiment in collective realization” (Alfassa, as cited in Mohanty, 2004, p. 32). In the clashes and conflicts over collective projects and the synergies and harmonization of group behavior and processes, there is a growth of consciousness at a collective level. This ‘bottom-up’ approach of the social experiment of Auroville makes it radically different from the ‘top-down’ authoritarian structures of say, Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes, that sought to impose an idealistic society on humanity. As in the Tibetan story where Milarepa is asked by his teacher Marpa to continually build and demolish towers, structures need to be continually torn down to allow for the growth of consciousness: The city is to be built from within and not imposed from without. Psychologically speaking, it

is the ever-changing collective consciousness of Aurovilians that shapes the outer manifestation of Auroville. Scientifically, from the perspective of complexity theory, as Haught explains, “whenever something new is introduced into an already ordered arrangement, the present state of order tends to break down. To be receptive to novelty, rigid orderliness has to give away” (2003, p. 191).

Aurovilians seem to implicitly comprehend and desire this evolutionary law.

Alan, summing up forty years of Auroville’s development, concludes, “May it [the evolutionary force] sweep away our sureties and deliver us, once again, to the Unknown” (2007a, p. 5).

Given her complete faith on the descending supramental force to help in the evolution of Earth in general and Auroville in particular, it is debatable how much importance the Mother herself accorded to human participation in the building of this idealistic city. In one recorded conversation, she completely dismisses human agency saying, “it [the city] will be built by what is invisible to you. The men [sic] who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger forces. Nothing depends on human beings” (Alfassa, 1977b, p. 13). Elsewhere, however, she admits that “in the details of the execution the human consciousness intervenes” (Alfassa, 1980, p. 207). What is clear, however, is that the Mother, like so many other evolutionary thinkers, scientists and philosophers, continually underscored the indeterminacy of the exact shape of the future. Auroville is called as the “city of the future” where, in the language of quantum physics and complexity theories, the actualization of the city is determined by a future teeming with possibilities. As

Nicolescu (2002) says, one can only bear witness to the birth of a new world that will remain unknown and unpredictable until its actual arrival.

My work has centered on Auroville as a social experiment consciously undertaken to help in the evolutionary transformation of the world. Given science's inability to say anything definitive about future evolution, one will never be able to truly gauge, from the present conditions, whether the experiment is a success or not, but by analyzing the social processes of Auroville from the perspective of the evolutionary mechanisms of the universe, I have sought to determine how far Auroville's development is in coherence with general evolutionary principles. In this regard, I feel that most serious challenge Auroville currently faces is the move by the Indian government to create rigid governing structures and processes. One can only hope that this is a passing phase in Auroville's development and that its anarchic ideal will again inspire Aurovilians to break down such structures that restrict their own self-development and the working of the natural or Divinely ordained evolutionary force. I find it laudatory that Aurovilians themselves do not perceive such challenges merely as obstacles that hinder Auroville's own development but as problems that the world as a whole needs to overcome. More specifically, close to the end of the writing of this dissertation, an Aurovilian mentioned to me that he saw the fundamentalist attitude of the Indian government as an example of the deeper problem of political and religious fundamentalism that threatens our world today (personal communication, April 24, 2007).

On this issue of organization, Auroville would do well to model itself after the decentralized relational paradigms, as identified by both Winter (2006) and Bauwens (2007). There is definitely an emerging global consciousness that finds both secular and spiritual expressions in the contemporary era. Auroville is just one phenomenon out of many in the world today that herald the birth of a new consciousness in the human species—a consciousness that views the individual and the social in complementary and not contradictory terms. Visionaries such as Teilhard de Chardin emphasize that this next step in evolution is a collective step:

The way out of the world, the gates of the future, the entry into the superhuman, will not open ahead to some privileged few, or to a single people, elect among all peoples. They will yield only to the thrust of *all together* (even if it were from the influence and guidance of a few—an ‘elite’) in the direction where all can rejoin and complete one another in a spiritual renewal of the Earth. (1955/1999, p. 173)

Auroville is one social experiment, consciously started by the Mother, unique and bold in its conceptualization, to hasten “the advent of the new species” on Earth (Alfassa, 1980, p. 214). An experiment that in the ultimate analysis can never fail for by its very experimentation with conscious evolution it leaves a historical imprint, subjectively and objectively, on the collective consciousness of humankind.

ENDNOTES

¹ All factual information on Auroville throughout the dissertation, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from the official Auroville website (Auroville, n.d.). An exact URL is provided for all direct quotes taken from the website. All opinions, unless explicitly stated otherwise, are that of the researcher's and based on participant-observation.

² Term for a formally accepted resident of Auroville and legally recognized as such by the Government of India. The idiosyncratic spelling with one "l" instead of two was given by the Mother herself (Alfassa, 2000, p. 276).

³ These three texts were repeatedly identified by my informants as sources of inspiration and are thus included here as Appendices A, B, and C respectively.

⁴ Here I follow Max Weber's definition of charisma as "a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he [sic] is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or quality" (Parsons, 1964, p. 358). In his theory of social organization and domination, Weber recognized charismatic authority of a Divinely-inspired leader as being a special kind of legitimizing authority.

⁵ The names of all my informants have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The informants whom I personally interviewed were either part of a pilot study or of the main study. To distinguish between the two categories of interviewees, I identify the interviewees of the pilot study by a single letter, from A to E, and those of the main study by the following pseudonyms: Carol, Kalai, Oliver, Sarah, Sonia, and Swaminathan. Transcripts of these interviews are available upon request, and I do not include a parenthetical citation to indicate the date of the interview. This distinguishes my formal interviewees from other casual informants, whose information is always referenced by a parenthetical citation.

⁶ Finding reliable biographies of mystics and spiritual saints is a common problem encountered in the religious studies. Most such biographies tend to be written by disciples and consequently suffer from being hagiographies, rather than scholarly, historical documents. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are no exception to this rule. Heehs' (1989) biographical monograph of Sri Aurobindo is the most scholarly work currently available though Iyengar's (1972) biography is also to be recommended for its wealth of detail. A more comprehensive biography by Heehs was released in 2008 after the writing of this dissertation. Van Vrekhem's (2000) and Iyengar's (1994) are the most detailed biographies of the Mother currently available. As researching primary documents about Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's life history was beyond the scope of this dissertation, I draw my biographical material from the aforementioned published texts.

⁷ "Sri" is a common honorific title signifying respect in India. Among Indian mystics, who assume this title or are referred to thus by their followers, the designation indicates a certain level of spiritual development. In Sri Aurobindo's case, the title was both increasingly used by him and his followers in 1926, the year he went into seclusion. And

from 1930 onwards, Aurobindo Ghose is only known as Sri Aurobindo. References to Sri Aurobindo's writings are listed under Ghose in this dissertation.

⁸ Indian women mystics are commonly addressed as *ma* which means *Mother*. Sri Aurobindo's and later usage in the tradition of prefixing the address with the article, "the" is adhered to in this dissertation.

⁹ *Routinization of charisma* refers to a sociological process toward institutionalization, identified by Weber (1968), where with the death of a charismatic leader the initial enthusiasm of the followers is replaced by their pragmatic need to make a living leading to a more structured organization.

¹⁰ Given the fact that humanity has acquired the power to alter atmospheric conditions of the planet (Kaku, 1994) and to determine the living conditions of other species (Swimme and Berry, 1992), the welfare of the Earth community depends directly on human knowledge and wisdom.

¹¹ There is neither irrefutable proof nor consensus among scientists about the exact process of evolution. The evolutionary process, especially the emergence of life on Earth, remains a scientific conundrum.

¹² Systems theory, which originated in the field of physical sciences, is now an interdisciplinary field that analyzes and describes systems—any group of objects that work in concert to produce some result—in nature, society, and science.

¹³ A dynamic open system, also referred to as a *dissipative system* in thermodynamics, is a system that is far from a state of equilibrium and open to exchanges of matter and energy with its environment. The system, to a certain extent, tolerates random fluctuations in the flows of energy and matter. However, if there are extreme fluctuations the system becomes chaotic and either collapses or reorganizes itself as a more complex system of a higher order. Only dynamic open systems are capable of evolution (Jantsch, 1980). *Chaos and complexity theories* now mathematically conceptualize the processes in such systems (Cambel, 1993). While the exact mathematical criteria for determining the behavior of a system to be chaotic may not be met by many living systems, evolutionary thinkers, such as Combs (1996) and Haught (2003), broadly use the terms chaos and complexity to understand processes in biological systems.

¹⁴ The term *autopoiesis*, first introduced by Maturana and Varela in the 1970s, is often used to describe self-organization in all systems. Strictly speaking though an autopoietic system is a self-replicating, autonomous, operationally closed system that does not exchange matter and energy with its environment (Laszlo, 1987).

¹⁵ By the phrase the "logic of the Infinite," Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1972a) refers to the working of the Divine Spirit. Contrasting it with the rational working of the human mind or the "logic of the finite" (p. 334), he writes: "But the being and action of the Infinite must not be therefore regarded as if it were a magic void of all reason; there is, on the contrary, a greater reason in all the operations of the Infinite, but it is not a mental or intellectual, it is a spiritual and supramental reason: there is a logic in it, because there are relations and connections infallibly seen and executed; what is magic to our finite reason is the logic of the Infinite. It is a greater reason, a greater logic because it is more vast, subtle, complex in its operations: it comprehends all the data which our observation fails

to seize, it deduces from them results which neither our deduction nor induction can anticipate, because our conclusions and inferences have a meagre foundation and are fallible and brittle” (p. 329).

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo’s concept of involution, while not scientifically accepted, is not contradicted either by common scientific knowledge, best paraphrased by Laszlo (1987), that given certain specific conditions, which were prevalent on Earth about four billion years ago, the complex molecules of amino acids, the basic building blocks of life spontaneously form themselves. However, for life to have risen out of inanimate matter, and indeed for the universe to have unfolded the way it did, physical and chemical conditions needed to be so precisely met that scientists refer to it as the “Goldilocks Effect” (Lovelock, 1987). Sri Aurobindo and many evolutionary biologists are dismissive of extraterrestrial origins of life.

¹⁷ On this issue, my data shows that many Aurovilians experience a lack of fraternity and are often hurt by interpersonal dynamics within Auroville. In a subsequent chapter, I analyze these research findings as being a shadow of Auroville’s ideals of “human unity” and “a true community.”

¹⁸ People formally accepted as residents of Auroville on a provisional basis, after which they are declared as Aurovilians.

¹⁹ Ideological *communitas* is the notion, made popular by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), of the feeling of togetherness among relative strangers due to a shared ideology.

²⁰ Culture here is defined simply as “shared understandings” (Swartz & Jordan, 1976).

²¹ A transdisciplinary approach or transdisciplinarity is both a unified approach to life and a research principle that advocates the integration of knowledge. While the term transdisciplinarity was first introduced by Piaget in 1970s, it has been given a new currency in the late 1980s by European researchers, such as Edgar Morin and Basarab Nicolescu, associated with the International Center for Transdisciplinary Research. Transdisciplinarity aims at understanding the contemporary world through an overarching unity of knowledge: “As the prefix *trans* indicates, transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines” (Nicolescu, 2002, p. 44). Multidisciplinarity (simultaneous research in several disciplines) and interdisciplinarity (transfer of epistemologies and applications of knowledge from one discipline to the other) overflow disciplinary boundaries, but their goals do not transcend the framework of disciplinary research; Transdisciplinarity complements disciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, but its goal of comprehending the real world by necessity transcends all research frameworks and disciplines.

²² The quotation read: “The next greatest rapture to the love of God is the love of God in men; there, too, one has the joy of multiplicity” (Sri Aurobindo, 1998a, p. 483).

²³ Given the wide range of methodological parameters and other factors that affect different forms of research, there is no consensus on what constitutes an acceptable response rate in social and psychological research and “a demonstrated lack of response bias is far more important than a high response rate” (Babbie, 2002, p. 260). The validity

of survey results depends directly on whether or not the respondents were representative of the entire population under assessment. As discussed in the sections on “Assumptions” and “Reliability and validity,” I have strong reason to believe that the youth and Tamil population did not respond to my survey. Consequently, I sought to reduce this response bias by specifically targeting these groups while conducting my oral interviews. Mailed questionnaires, like mine, can vary tremendously in terms of length of format. As opposed to a multiple-choice questionnaire, a questionnaire such as mine requiring descriptive answers demands more time of the participant and hence are likely to have lower response rates. Historically, for some reason, unless it is an important issue that affects the immediate working of the whole community, surveys of the Auroville population have had low response rates. For example, a ballot survey conducted in March 2007 by a community-approved group to determine organizational policies drew only 76 responses.

²⁴ The handwritten responses to the survey were typed in. As far as possible, the integrity of the text was maintained, and no corrections were made to erroneous spelling or punctuation.

²⁵ The limitations of the electronic counter that is used in *AV Net* to count the number of people visiting a web page prevent more precise estimates.

²⁶ On this issue of nomenclature, it can be noted that from an emic perspective, members of an intentional community generally do not like the term utopia because of its historical connotation as being an imaginary, unattainable place. Also, as Winter (2006) points out, the term brings to mind the totalitarian vision of twentieth-century dictators, particularly Hitler and Stalin, who sought to impose their ideas of a perfect society by ruthlessly exterminating those they deemed as opposing their vision, though strictly speaking, in retrospect, these were *dystopias* and not utopias. Communes are generally regarded as small experiments with no more than 25 members (Abrams & McCullough, 1976).

²⁷ The General Assembly of UNESCO unanimously passed four resolutions of support for Auroville in 1966, 1968, 1970 and 1983 inviting “member states and international non-governmental organizations to participate in the development of Auroville as an international cultural township designed to bring together the values of different cultures and civilizations in a harmonious environment with integrated living standards which correspond to man’s physical and spiritual needs” (Auroville Universal Township, n.d., para. 4).

²⁸ In a conversation, the Mother says, “It [Auroville] may take a hundred years, it may take a thousand years, I don’t know, but Auroville will be because it is decreed” (Auroville Press, n.d., p. 34).

²⁹ Information attributed to the Mother in this paragraph is taken from unpublished manuscripts, which are compilations of all references to Auroville made by the Mother (including unpublished handwritten notes and unrecorded conversations) in the years 1970 and 1971 respectively.

³⁰ It could be noted here that, apart from the Matrimandir management group, the Matrimandir is not institutionally sanctified by any governing structure in Auroville. Historically, starting with the importance that the Mother gave to the building, there has been hegemonic understanding of the sacredness of Matrimandir but this understanding is

far more socio-cultural than institutional. Aurovilians environmentalists have often publicly decried the construction of this extravagant building, which has had a considerable environmental impact.

³¹ It needs to be pointed out that given the continued hegemony of the modern outlook in mainstream society, contemporary spiritual expressions are negatively viewed by the press resulting in the fact that most people are reluctant to publicly admit of their involvement in spiritual practices (Forman, 2004)

³² It could be noted here that the Mother (Alfassa, 1981) preferred to use the word *Divine* over *spiritual* because she felt that the latter term, particularly in its usage in French, implied a rejection of the material world.

³³ For a thorough discussion of the political and legal usage of the terms religious, spiritual and secular, in reference to Auroville within the nation-state of India, see Minor (1999).

³⁴ It has to be noted here, however, that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother regarded their own evolutionary work, in the highest terms, as “an Action from the Supreme [emphasis in original]” (Alfassa, 1978, p. 69). In numerous letters, Sri Aurobindo (1970) clearly regarded Integral Yoga as one of many possible spiritual paths, stating that different paths led to different goals. And yet, Sri Aurobindo, like his contemporary Teilhard de Chardin, undoubtedly saw evolution as “a general condition, which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must submit to and satisfy . . . in order to be conceivable and true” (1955/1999, p. 152).

³⁵ At the moment, while there are a number of groups who seek to explore these concepts in the contexts of their nations, there is still a lack of clarity in Auroville as how best to develop this zone of the city. At present, only India and Tibet have established pavilions.

³⁶ For a thorough deconstruction of the concept that religious practices are predicated on beliefs see Asad, 1993.

³⁷ For instance, on the issue of the power human intent, anthropologist Wallace (1956) maintains that certain changes in a society can happen within a generation because of the explicit intentions held by the members of the society.

³⁸ Aurovilians generally use just their first name, even in their publications. Last names are used to distinguish between people having the same first name. I follow this practice in my dissertation.

³⁹ This figure of 3,000 just gives an idea of what is called the summer exodus in Auroville. It does not accurately reflect the number of Aurovilians who travel abroad each year for the number includes tourists visiting and excludes who buy their air-tickets from elsewhere.

⁴⁰ The Auroville Council, an elected group, occasionally assisted by a conflict-resolution group, deals with all internal and interpersonal problems in Auroville. But this group has not always been deemed successful in its work, and their decisions are often challenged by the aggrieved parties who accuse it of being biased. At the time of writing this

dissertation, there was a move to institute a mediation group in Auroville, based on mediation practices prevalent in the Indian justice system.

⁴¹ V. Turner carefully distinguishes his concept of unstructured *communitas* from Durkheim's notion of solidarity. Societies that exhibit unstructured *communitas* are non-exclusive and their boundaries are, says V. Turner, "ideally coterminous with those of the human species. *Communitas* is in this respect strikingly different from Durkheimian 'solidarity,' the force of which depends upon an in-group/out-group contrast" (1969, p. 132).

⁴² I am alluding here to class distinctions among Aurovilians. There is a clear hierarchy between Aurovilian managers and hired labor; a fact that upsets many Western visitors to Auroville.

⁴³ My research here focuses solely on internal relationships within Auroville and not on Auroville's relationship to the outside world. Pillai (2005) points out that Auroville's external image is socially constructed by groups wielding power in the community.

⁴⁴ An exception to this fact is homophobia: While I have not investigated this sensitive issue directly, through chance conversations with Aurovilians, I gathered that, because of archaic Indian laws and cultural views about homosexuality, there was a certain degree of homophobia in the community. Homosexuality, in other words, seems to have been influenced by the Indian milieu and socially constructed in Auroville.

⁴⁵ North Indians, that is Indians from outside of Tamil Nadu, have also reported that, on occasion, they have experienced the behavior and language of Westerners as being racist (e.g., see Mohanty, 2001). But North Indians, because of the educated, urbanized background that they come from seem to relate to Westerners more on an equal footing. There is a growing divide between people from North and South India, but this is based on socio-cultural factors of education, status and economic power and not on race.

⁴⁶ Ray's and Anderson's (2000) research is the best documented study of the change in social values in USA.

⁴⁷ For a deeper insight into the promises and challenges of a globalized society, see Winter (2006, pp. 169-203).

⁴⁸ Technology is defined here not just as the usage of a mechanical tool but as "the instrumentality that imbues all human activities and extends human powers to act on nature and interact with others" (Laszlo, 1987, pp. 92-93).

⁴⁹ This trend where society reorganizes itself around the technology it uses is based on the fact that the adopted technology marks an increase in the efficiency of production procedures (Laszlo, 1987), and because of the increased efficiency this becomes the dominant trend for the evolution of societies all over the world. However, there can be exceptions to this trend: According to Swimme, aboriginal hunter-gatherer societies existing in certain parts of Africa today do not see the need for adopting agricultural technology (personal communication, March 5, 2008).

⁵⁰ The main brunt of Wilber's work and his schematic representation of evolution suggest a parallel unfolding of evolution in all the four aspects of life. As I have argued elsewhere

(see Mohanty, 2003a), I disagree with this premise. While there is always an inherent connection and mutual influence of the subjective and objective dimensions of life, development, whether in the individual or in society, is far more complex and convoluted. There is evidence to believe, as I examine later in the chapter, that because of the self-reflexive consciousness of the human being, evolution can be spearheaded by the subjective dimension of life. Wilber occasionally reverts to this view, notably in his 1995 description of the emergence of a planetary culture.

⁵¹ Given the plethora of meanings that the term “postmodern” has accrued, I prefer M. King’s term of postsecular spirituality to Griffin’s (1988) usage of constructive postmodernism to define the contemporary spiritual society.

⁵² Such a symbolic stage of life can also be glimpsed in ancient Greek, Egyptian and Celtic cultures, which were steeped in occult mysteries and led by a priestly class (Ghose, 1971).

⁵³ A case in point here is the fact that, in 1968, 125 nations agreed to the Charter of Auroville, including countries, such as capitalistic USA, communist USSR, as well as France and Germany—countries that had been historically at war with each other for centuries.

⁵⁴ It needs to be borne in mind that the term *evolution* is both generally used to indicate a developmental process over time, and also specifically used, in a more scientific sense, to indicate the processes of self-organization, complexity and spontaneous emergence that characterizes growth in a complex system. My research indicates Auroville to be a complex evolutionary system, but it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to compare the evolutionary process of Auroville with the development of other religious orders and societies, which may or may not be evolutionary in their unfolding in the scientific sense of the word.

⁵⁵ As a case in point to show how Auroville transpersonal ideals as “objects of sociality” shape human intentionality, I would like to again cite one of my survey respondents who said, “Auroville’s *raison d’être* makes one have so many more responsibilities on oneself—so hard on oneself” (Appendix F).

⁵⁶ Institutionally, barring certain rigid and bureaucratic tendencies in the present organization, Aurovilians enjoy a great deal of freedom in conducting their lives. Some Aurovilians, however, upholding the ideal of celibacy as institutionalized by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, are disdainful of sexuality in all its expressions. Similarly, a simplistic lifestyle is implicitly advocated as a spiritual value. Thus, while it is rarely explicitly stated or contested in public arenas, the overriding cultural message is that monogamy, or even celibacy, and simplicity should be the sociocultural norms of Auroville. Here, as with practically every other aspect of Auroville’s life, there exists a dialectical tension between transcendental spiritual ideals and everyday practice.

⁵⁷ For an excellent short introduction to the Mother’s unusual life, and Aurovilians’ widely divergent perspectives about her, see “Chapter 5: The Mother of Auroville” (Pillai, 2005).

⁵⁸ Outlandish as the idea may seem to our rational sense that physical matter can exhibit different properties, the growing *string theory* in quantum mechanics offers a similar notion. String theory, building on Einstein's relativity theory that establishes time as the fourth dimension (the other three being the spatial dimension of length, breadth and height), puts forward the hypothesis that there are actually ten or more dimensions governing the mechanics of quantum particles and the universe. Just as much as the properties of matter change in the fourth dimension of time, as proven by Einstein, similarly in additional dimensions, matter would exhibit completely different properties. String theory is still in the process of being empirically tested in the laboratory and scientists cannot even begin to describe the nature of matter in a universe of ten or more dimensions (Kaku, 1994). Interestingly, the Mother, while explaining that the Divine presence exists in a plane of consciousness beyond the three dimensions of matter, alludes to the multidimensional reality of quantum mechanics:

If you come to the Divine Presence in the atom . . . you touch so infinitesimal a domain . . . that you can no longer distinguish between two, three, four or five dimensions. The movements constituting an atom are, in the matter of size, so imperceptible that they cannot be understood with our three-dimensional understanding, the more so as they follow laws which elude completely this three-dimensional idea. (Alfassa, 1972, pp. 139-40)

⁵⁹ I believe that this could be due to the limitations of my methodology, for during the course of my study, I came across a preliminary study done by an Aurovilian that sought to phenomenologically describe the opening of the soul or the psychic being among fifteen Aurovilians and people connected to Auroville (Anonymous, 2004). While, this latter study could have benefited from a more methodological approach and analysis, it nevertheless indicates an important spiritual dimension of Auroville.

⁶⁰ Many Aurovilians felt that a commune of largely French people, colloquially known as the Mirramukhi group, who had shared lifestyle practices, such as wearing white, increasingly became cultish in their behavior. The group went back to France out of its own accord, but some of the group members estranged themselves from their families in Auroville.

⁶¹ I myself had been part of such a group with certain minimal practices, namely collective meditation and optional verbal sharing for a short while in the 1980s. While the practice was not as deep or beneficial as my individual meditation practice, counseling sessions, or self-development workshops I had, it nevertheless opened another avenue of participating in the yoga, namely a relational avenue. I know that such a group as I describe currently exists in Auroville but I did not gain access to them. I also readily admit that such a group could collectively engage in spiritual bypassing and/or, if governed by strong leaders, degenerate into cultish behavior.

⁶² Roger Anger passed away in January 2008 as I was working on this dissertation.

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APPENDIX A: THE CHARTER OF AUROVILLE

1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville, one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.
2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.
3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realizations.
4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity. (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 199-200)

APPENDIX B: THE DREAM

There should be somewhere upon earth a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of goodwill, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme Truth; a place of peace, concord, harmony, where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his suffering and misery, to surmount his weakness and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and the care for progress would get precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the seeking for pleasures and material enjoyments.

In this place, children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their soul. Education would be given, not with a view to passing examinations and getting certificates and posts, but for enriching the existing faculties and bringing forth new ones. In this place titles and positions would be supplanted by opportunities to serve and organize. The needs of the body will be provided for equally in the case of each and everyone. In the general organization intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority will find expression not in the enhancement of the pleasures and powers of life but in the increase of duties and responsibilities.

Artistic beauty in all forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, will be available equally to all, the opportunity to share in the joys they bring being limited solely by each one's capacities and not by social or financial position.

For in this ideal place money would be no more the sovereign lord. Individual merit will have a greater importance than the value due to material wealth and social position. Work would not be there as the means of gaining one's livelihood, it would be the means whereby to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service to the whole group, which on its side would provide for each one's subsistence and for the field of his work.

In brief, it would be a place where the relations among human beings, usually based almost exclusively upon competition and strife, would be replaced by relations of emulation for doing better, for collaboration, relations of real brotherhood. (Alfassa, 1978, pp. 93-94)

APPENDIX C: TO BE A TRUE AUROVILIAN

1. The first necessity is the inner discovery by which one learns who one really is behind the social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At our inmost centre there is a free being, wide and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the acting centre of our being and our life in Auroville.
2. One lives in Auroville in order to be free of moral and social conventions; but this liberty must not be a new slavery to the ego, its desires and its ambitions. The fulfillment of desires bars the route to the inner discovery which can only be attained in peace and the transparency of a perfect disinterestedness.
3. The Aurovilian must lose the proprietary sense of possession. For our passage in the material world, that which is indispensable to our life and to our action is put at our disposal according to the place we should occupy there. The more conscious our contact is with our inner being, the more exact are the means given.
4. Work, even manual work, is an indispensable thing for the inner discovery. If one does not work, if one does not inject his consciousness into matter, the latter will never develop. To let one's consciousness organize a bit of matter by way of one's body is very good. To establish order around oneself, helps to bring order within oneself. One should organize life not according to outer, artificial rules, but according to an organized, inner consciousness, because if one allows life to drift without imposing the control of a higher consciousness, life becomes inexpressive and irresolute. It is to waste one's time in the sense that matter persists without a conscious utilization.
5. The whole earth must prepare itself for the advent of the new species, and Auroville wants to consciously work towards hastening that advent.
6. Little by little it will be revealed to us what this new species should be, and meanwhile the best measure to take is to consecrate oneself entirely to the Divine.

The only true liberty is that obtained by union with the Divine. One can unite with the Divine only when the ego is mastered. (Alfassa, 1980, pp. 213-214)

APPENDIX D: THE SURVEY FORM

Dear Friends,

I am engaged in a research project that primarily seeks to understand what inspires people to be here, and what are the challenges that people face in their life here. I would be rumba [very] grateful if you could fill out this short questionnaire for me.

You can drop off your responses in closed boxes at the Solar Kitchen, the solar café, the Pour Tous centres, and the Town Hall. Or e-mail it to me at avcommunity@gmail.com (make sure that your name is included in the e-mail).

1. In order to help me select people to interview, please name three Aurovilians, excluding yourself, who you feel somehow, by their work or just by their presence, contribute significantly and positively to the Auroville experiment. (Please choose people who have lived in Auroville for at least 5 years and intend to spend the rest of their lives here.)
2. What do you like about living in Auroville?
3. What do you find challenging about living here?
4. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your life in Auroville?

APPENDIX E: RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY: THE JOYS OF LIVING IN

AUROVILLE

Personal Factors

Work

1. I like peace, my work and the community life
2. The constant opportunity available to take up work that makes a difference
3. The freedom to find one's deeper self and one's own work
4. The idea of Karma Yoga
5. Pursuing, living "Karma yoga"
6. The freedom to work in areas I'm interested but not educated in
7. The diversity of job opportunities (and people)
8. The inner experience, possibilities to take up different works regardless of 'official' qualifications
9. I like everything that I do and the kind of life that I have here. It is difficult for me to stress some aspects more than others, but if I try to underline some I would like to mention: the possibility to align my inner aspirations with the totality of my life and my work here. I have a sense of living in a permanent adventure in my work, my studies, in all my daily activities
10. All work is for the Divine, not for a paycheck. The practice of "karma yoga" fully resonates for me
11. Recently I started to work in Matrimandir and it is the most wonderful and powerful experience. Not to work for myself any more
12. The spirit that comes through shared work towards the goal
13. The idea of working towards a better world
14. The idea of Karma Yoga, the freedom in the choice of ways to rise in consciousness
15. Working with the youth is a blessing.
16. I like the opportunity to work in anything that interest me and the chance to learn something new all the time

Freedom

1. Freedom.
2. Freedom of creativity here, experienced in all kinds of activities and situations
3. The relative freedom to be who you are, to be expressive at many levels
4. The freedom to express oneself
5. Its freedom for individuals explore latest talents
6. The importance and freedom given to find, look for our true self
7. I am deeply happy here, in spite of occasional difficulties, inner or outward. I have never felt so free in my life. It took several years for my self-image, collected during a rather long life from conditioning,

professional expectations and appreciation, and society in general to scrape off and shed all that crust. The guidance of the Mother is very strong here, and it's quite something to get used to

8. The freedom of expression
9. The freedom of expressing the complexity and vivid life style
10. Freedom and space for expression
11. And I like the fact that it allows the possibility to do just about anything that one can conceive of
12. The freedom for kids
13. Super good for the children to grow freely and happily
14. For me Auroville is home. I love the freedom I had growing up here. Now I teach at school and I realized that parents have the freedom to drop their children in school in capable hands and just have the whole day for themselves till the children come home in the evening after sports. The children have the freedom to run around Auroville with their friends
15. The aspiration to do what you have to do, not to do what you are "supposed" to do
16. The relative freedom to live a life that is more directed by inner forces than outer. Freedom and the ambition to choose our way to a higher consciousness
17. The freedom to find one's deeper self and one's own work
18. The freedom generally, but especially the freedom to work in areas I'm interested but not educated in
19. Auroville made me my own self. Just 10 kms down in Pondicherry, I might be living nearby as a daughter, wife, lawyer etc. but not myself. It's possible outside as well. But the freedom in Auroville taught me the best discipline and taught me to be myself. And this self, I want to happily offer for 'Divine consciousness'
20. The free choice in nearly all areas (except housing nowadays)
21. The idea of Karma Yoga, the freedom in the choice of ways to rise in Consciousness
22. The freedom of discovering our true being, beyond social familial and cultural habits
23. Beautiful, experiencing, freedom
24. Freedom—to wear whatever clothes we please; to be able to talk openly with others including men, which wouldn't have been possible in our culture
25. Independence—to be able to do what we want; to speak out our minds
26. Freedom from cultural habits

Experimentation

1. I like participating in such a unique and life-transforming experiment
2. Chances for experiments
3. The space to experiment is valued

4. What I like more is my personal involvement in the one experiment that I consider is essential
5. That it is an experiment to evolve higher consciousness—individually and collectively
6. To be part of an evolutionary experiment
7. The never-ending experiment on all aspects of life
8. That it is an experiment to evolve higher consciousness—individually and collectively

Growth and Progress

1. Conditions for inner growth are ideal
2. Drive to growth
3. Many things..... the incredible possibilities for growth and progress through myriad challenging yet fulfilling experiences
4. A sort of freedom given and many opportunities to experimental research to progress. It provides a constant opportunity for my personal growth. It does that by challenging the ego, so that all the things that go seemingly wrong are actually serving this purpose the best
5. It is very inspiring. I have gotten a lot from it. I have been able to progress so much over the years. The atmosphere here is very conducive to inner change and helps you find yourself
6. I love Auroville. It helps me in my inner growth and if I'm here it means that Auroville is my short-cut to myself. God knows if I'm here till the rest of my life but each of us is a piece of mosaic and plays one's unique role for Auroville's growth. Life is already a challenge especially if you know why you are here
7. There are numerous possibilities to grow. It is indeed a place where one can feel that there is something beyond human organizational power
8. The time that you can spend for meditation and inner growing here
9. There has been a growth in the understanding of oneself and the world
10. Sharing a commitment to growth inner [word indecipherable] and to the well-being of all. It is a good place for inner work. Auroville stretches you to grow
11. I like the opportunity to work in anything that interest me and the chance to learn something new all the time
12. It's a place that has given me a lot—To know a lot about myself, and be able to see others also in this light. And then the opportunity to work on some of my issues (a few maybe...); to be able to think consciously about anything; bringing me closer to some of my inner quests
13. Progress—to learn something new

Opportunities

1. The constant opportunity available to take up work that makes a difference
2. An amazing array of learning opportunities in many fields

3. Auroville is a nest of opportunities. Everything is open if you have the energy. a vibrant community engaged in a wide variety of activities and offering an amazing array of learning opportunities in many fields
4. There are many things to do here
5. Many possibilities to do positive things
6. The possibility
7. The possibilities in the diversity from which one can find her own unique way to grow and contribute to the whole
8. It is an opportunity to live here and participate in the process of realization of the Dream
9. Living with so much open-ended possibility to explore, create and manifest what one is guided to do
10. The potential to be and do
11. The opportunity to express themselves
12. To have the time to practice spirituality—to reflect more deeply on the things that affected me
13. The possibilities

Adventure

1. The unexpected adventure
2. I love what I offer/do to the Auroville Adventure
3. I have a sense of living in a permanent adventure in my work, my studies, in all my daily activities
4. It's an adventure
5. Everyday new life

Interpersonal Factors

Certain Qualities of the Community

1. The honesty and goodwill of people
2. The collective, the over all good will between people, the collaborations, the friends the lovely children parents!
3. A vibrant community engaged in a wide variety of activities and offering an amazing array of learning opportunities in many fields
4. Sometimes it is very hard, but still I find peace and supported Auroville as a whole family
5. Not to judge others—let not others judge you
6. Meeting beautiful people, found dedicated people for the community

The Diversity of the Community

1. There are so many different types of Aurovilians and it is great. Also, so may different guests pass by Auroville which is also great—All sharing in need to progress

2. The diversity
3. Many interesting people visit Auroville day-to-day human unity amidst a diverse population
4. Connecting with a large variety of people and cultures. Unity in diversity
5. Effort of most of the people to make a difference. To be part of an intentional, international and intercultural township created to manifest some of the highest aspirations humankind has ever dreamt of
6. The possibilities in the diversity from which one can find her own unique way to grow and contribute to the whole
7. The diversity of job opportunities and people
8. Many different and interesting people
9. Its diversity of nationality
10. I like the international aspect of it (hopefully it will stay that way the different cultural nationalities, each different and yet feeling a togetherness. And in some groups of friends a sharing of spiritual experiences
11. The diversity and the fact that most of the people who live here try to aspire a “higher” life
12. To join a group of people from different nationalities who have the same ideals
13. A spontaneous, inner connection with individuals, sometimes even if I don’t know them well. (I experienced this before I came to Auroville, but never so often or with such a diversity of individuals
14. Multinational experiences
15. Wonderful to meet people of the world

The Sense of a Community in General

1. I like the sense of community
2. The attempt to live together as a community
3. I like (peace, my work and) the community life
4. I like how people can take time to just chat by the side of the road. How new initiators can come together of a group of like minded individuals, the good vibes
5. I like the Aurovilians
6. I am happy to have participated and learned through our boarding school in New Creation since 1983
7. Also the sense of community and shared adventure
8. Community life
9. People exposure

The Sense of a Spiritual Community (Sangha)

1. The fact that most of the people who live here try to aspire a “higher” life
2. To join a group of people from different nationalities who have the same ideals

3. I do find a lot of spiritual kinship and brotherhood among my fellow Aurovilians
4. The aspiration, sincere efforts to make the experiment work
5. The spirit that comes through shared work towards the goal
6. I like living in Auroville because of a common feeling about responsibility for it (not everyone, but most people I know well)
7. The growing “sangha-Deva”
8. Living in a proximity of people who draw their inspiration from the vision and work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother
9. The possibility to try and become a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness—which is an accepted thing just like doing your Pour Tous [Auroville’s Supermarket] shopping and not a thing which is ‘crazy’ for people. Living in a community of people who are travelers on the path
10. In one or other way every one is trying the same and are proud of us all for not easily giving up
11. It’s a place that has given me a lot—To know a lot about myself, and be able to see others also in this light; to know that somewhere we are all seekers and all struggling in our quests
12. Sharing the conscious co-creation for our evolution—sharing a commitment to growth inner [word indecipherable] and to the well-being of all—living in Unity in Diversity, slow as it may seem at times—living with so much open-ended possibility to explore, create and manifest what one is guided to do
13. Collective life, peaceful living and aspiring towards higher consciousness
14. Trying to live together in a spirit of love, respect, harmony in order to build together the city of the future
15. The people—quality of aspiration, self-giving for an ideal, depth. To give your experience and energy to Auroville community
16. The challenge; the opportunity to contribute something to the future of all human unity [emphasis in original] and life on earth; the knowledge that my fellow Aurovilian are on a similar spiritual path to my own, and the inspiration and support this gives me; the possibility to contribute something positive and at times significant—regardless because there is no retirement here
17. Unity, experiencing

Transpersonal Factors

1. Leading a spiritual life according to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother
2. Here is only one thing worthy to be lived. To see the one in all existence, to see all existence in the one. To have forever the experience of satyam ritam brihat ananda
3. Higher spiritual consciousness (New consciousness, Mother’s consciousness, Supramental consciousness) working in a perceptible manner at each moment, with each individual, in all the places, through all

the circumstances (positive and negative). Whoever gives attention to it invariably it is perceptible

4. Auroville is my short-cut to myself
5. Sharing the conscious co-creation for our evolution—sharing a commitment to growth inner [word indecipherable] and to the well-being of all—living in Unity in Diversity, slow as it may seem at times—living with so much open-ended possibility to explore, create and manifest what one is guided to do
6. This is a good place for integral yoga
7. The high power put by ‘Mother’ concentration of people, with the same goal, it gives support and evolution
8. To live in Auroville is to be an instrument in the hands of Spirit of Auroville, which is dynamically active behind all that happens in Auroville. This action at times suppress all appearances and judgments
9. It’s the only hope to save this earth and humanity. It gives a direction without a limiting set of dogmas. The emphasis on spirituality
10. Leading a spiritual life according to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in India. To do the aforementioned in spite of my “adverse forces” within me and outside of me
11. The participation to the discovery of a new human being, centered on its Divine reality
12. There is an aspiration, a dream for human unity
13. It puts your whole outlook in the broadest possible perspective
14. Auroville was founded by the Mother and she had told us (the whole family of six members, currently only three are there) to be here. She knew what is best and I trust Her fully
15. It feels good to be part of something greater than my own little life
16. One can do ones yoga without disturbance
17. I like everything that I do and the kind of life that I have here. It is difficult for me to stress some aspects more than others, but if I try to underline some I would like to mention: the possibility to align my inner aspirations with the totality of my life and my work here. I have a sense of living in a permanent adventure in my work, my studies, in all my daily activities
18. My everyday life is part of my spiritual path, as well as being part of building the city the earth needs
19. Walking the path
20. I feel I didn’t really choose to live here—rather I have to live here and I surrender
21. I just know that I have to be here. What I like about it seems irrelevant
22. It is not a matter of living. Auroville is a difficult place to live when you try to do something, create and manifest the Dream. Auroville is a challenge to us and mankind
23. The collective inner orientation towards this “something else”
24. That we are all here for the thirst of a common vision
25. Time and space and Matrimandir which is given to contemplate the Divine play

26. The Matrimandir as the soul of Auroville is my “home”. I simply would not wish to be anywhere else on earth but here; near Her
27. That the Divine is at the Centre, the Matrimandir
28. All... (almost!) Matrimandir, the spirit of Auroville, the growing “sangha-Deva”, etc.
29. More than that my attachment is to the “Matrimandir Chamber”. I realize the high presence in the chamber; every sitting is a new experience to me. This is amazing, which keeps me in Auroville
30. The dream coming true
31. Dream of the Mother
32. Mother’s dream
33. To remember the charter . . . to be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness. . . and . . . to discover the inner being vast and free
34. Try to discover Divine life, freedom (utilize in proper way), responsibility
35. It fulfills a dream, a desire to rise to the Divine’s imagination of how our lives should be in Auroville, I have gradually grown aware of a work, a vision, of I could do for India and the world. I now need work in a disciplined way for it while keeping open to the light and consciousness. The eternal battle of manifesting dream I don't really think of Auroville so much as a place, but more as a project, an experiment, a dream—that MUST be realized
36. The power radiating all over Auroville
37. I feel “something” in the land of Auroville. I feel that “something” more at Matrimandir, Savitri Bhavan and in the forest area of Auroville. Moreover Auroville is the physical manifestation of the Mother’s Dream and I feel favored to be in Auroville
38. There are numerous possibilities to grow. It is indeed a place where one can feel that there is something beyond human organizational power
39. It is grace even just to live in Auroville. Feeling that this is the Mother’s project
40. The inevitable feeling that the Divine is close though at lives very heavily masked
41. The atmosphere here is very conducive to inner change and helps you find yourself
42. The presence of Mother and Sri Aurobindo
43. I like to live in the Presence. The presence of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, the presence of the Auroville spirit; no place elsewhere can give we that kind of nourishment and safety on a subtle level
44. The guidance of the Mother is very strong here, and it’s quite something to get used to. The contact with Mother/spirituality love the feeling of the presence of the Mother
45. Conditions for inner growth are ideal
46. I was “touched” by the Mother in 1972. The yoga of Sri Aurobindo keeps inspiring me
47. This place is being guided by a conscious force. I’m part of it makes me happy in spite of my housing problems

48. It is wonderful to feel oneself as an instrument in the hands of the Divine.
It is humiliating to be a puppet by Grace
49. The spiritual atmosphere of India. The presence of Mother and Sri Aurobindo
50. I am happy and content. I always feel the presence of The Mother
51. I love the feeling of the presence of the Mother
52. The force of the Mother
53. The sense of future

Other Factors

1. The complexity and vivid life style.
2. Love
3. It depends about your inner feeling. I am here since 6 years and I am happy to be just [indecipherable word]
4. Facing all kinds of challenges
5. Auroville has for me many challenges, here could and can create what felt necessary for environment, nature and education
6. Restoring nature
7. I live in Auroville. Full point. I would sincerely not be able to answer this question as I have stopped thinking in terms of likes and dislikes ever since I started living in Auroville in September'94

Situational Factors

1. That the Pondicherry Ashram is close
2. I like the natural environment
3. The climate
4. The climate (generally)
5. The natural environment
6. By chance, I developed a liking for Indian food, otherwise . . .
7. The greenness, the light as it's reflected in the variety of colors
8. I like living in Auroville because of the nature surrounding us
9. I like Auroville with its greenery
10. I like to live in harmony with the Nature
11. Surrounded by nature
12. The nature
13. The mangoes
14. The pristine environment.
15. The Tamil environment surrounding Auroville environment
16. The outer environment
17. The weather in January
18. The natural environment provides a balance in my life never before experienced
19. A stimulating environment that encourages a close contact with Nature and one Self

20. The peaceful, quiet environs of Auroville
21. The trees and wildlife
22. It's a wonderful place for kids to grow up!).
23. Breaking the cultural conditioning is easy
24. Its insulated character
25. The ability to get most alternative healing for free
26. Auroville is a community: where I live, eat, work and play is integrated/one. This is critical for my quality of life

APPENDIX F: RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY: THE CHALLENGES OF
LIVING IN AUROVILLE

Situational Factors

1. No stable electricity
2. The fact that after more than 30 years living in Auroville a “foreigner” can be expelled from India with no legal way to return to the country
3. The distance from our families
4. Being far away from your homeland (family, friends, culture)
5. The heat, the pollution
6. Too hot sometimes
7. The mold in monsoon
8. Monsoon roads
9. The roads
10. Driving on the roads
11. The heat, the bugs, the dirt
12. The heat
13. When it’s too hot and humid (over 35 degree or with extreme humidity below that)
14. The climate in summer and monsoon
15. The climate (health wise)
16. Sometimes the climate!
17. Heat, dust
18. The climate
19. The heat (though I like it somehow)
20. Climate constraints (quick deteriorates of the material, heat, humidity)
21. The weather is extremely difficult
22. The filth disease and pollution around
23. The climate, the ants, termites and mosquitoes
24. The climate and the never-ending heat

Situational Factors in Control of the Community

Housing

1. There is not enough housing and the whole concept of people coming here and having to buy or build their house is not within the ideals of Auroville. If someone has to spend so many lakhs [ten thousands of rupees] on their housing (and this is increasing every year) of course they will be attached
2. Lack of housing
3. Lack of much-needed housing
4. Not having a proper living space
5. Houses for the newcomers
6. The lack of housing

Financial situation

1. India is getting more and more expensive and maintenance is not enough to live on
2. Financial side of it. To be here by choice YES. To be stuck without a choice to leave (e.g., holiday....) NO
3. When dependent on the income generated here not being able to get things repaired properly, or not finding the right shops for this or that important item
4. The economic situation
5. We are voluntary workers, but at the same time we have to pay for everything more and more
6. Lack of financial support
7. Living on the edge financially
8. Unless one has certain minimum financial resources or could create resources to for capital needs such as shelter etc. and has some spare funds to meet the shortfall in running expenses or to meet the emergency expenses, for most it would be very difficult to live here in spite of good intentions, skills, talents and aspirations
9. I have children and grandchildren in the US and to visit I have to go out to work to pay for my ticket as well as to supplement maintenance. Sometimes I choose work in Auroville that pays better money for this reason. I'd rather get away from having to think so much about money
10. Living without adequate money and so not having the freedom that money could buy (e.g., to take a break, improving your house maintenance, bike maintenance)
11. The financial situation
12. The inability of the community to deal with the money force

Organization

1. The [bureaucratic] administration
2. The increasingly bureaucratic set-up, government interference
3. The organization—complex, clumsy to more forward coherently or collectively
4. I am seriously worried by the Government intrusion into Auroville's internal affairs and way of functioning now occurring with increasing intensity in the Foundation office, seemingly at the instigation of the Chairman of the Governing Board and being implemented by the GB's Secretary here in Auroville
5. I think the Entry Group and the Housing Group should be totally reorganised with qualified people handling clear instructions about it. Modern organisation-ideas should be introduced and, after decision-making in Residents Assembly, be used. Also the money-making of the

- units, the profits and the costs should be made public, in sincerity, and be controlled by reliable accountants
6. Why is it very difficult to organize ourselves in Auroville? All the various working groups are so fake, maybe because of no commitment, no sincerity and no principle of their own
 7. Social injustice, worldview extremes
 8. Land crisis
 9. Let's build the city. Look at most "happening" cities. Mixed land-use is THE way to go (sorry ma, I am not a fan of zoning)
 10. Economy overloaded with the job
 11. Economy
 12. Nowadays, you can't settle anything by having an open discussion. What you say gets reported to someone else, some one else or some other group, and your issue is discussed by that group. We should just be able to discuss and solve our issues immediately

Personal (and Transpersonal) Factors

1. Nothing (except, at times, to cope with the tremendous force that is at work here) but honestly, what challenges one here is what challenges one any/everywhere: my own lapses into ignorance "sleep"
2. Doing the yoga—detachment, equanimity, finding joy in doing things you don't like, but have to do or end up doing . . . human unity; Auroville's reason for being that makes one have so many more responsibilities on oneself—so hard on oneself)
3. To handle negative responses about Auroville and still to find for myself the right way to proceed.
4. To live up to the ideals of the integral Yoga in spite of being myself, it is very difficult to keep it sustained as here too the same identities I'm bearing daughter, mom, wife, lawyer
5. It's difficult as well to survive my pure self from my own ego. But I like this challenge
6. To live in Truth Consciousness
7. To accept the evolutionary character of the experiment
8. Keeping a balance between the work for the community and the "work" of keeping oneself open to the Light and the consciousness. This situation may not be specific to Auroville. However, living in Auroville requires that one ought to give special importance to this. Constant struggle against *tamas* [inertia], inside and outside myself
9. There are of course also the difficulties to overcome—for example the attachment the idea that money should be more available to do what I desire—which by the way is not necessarily what would be best for me or probably for what I came to do in Auroville
10. To live the inner experience—the daily busy life with all its distractions

11. And on an inner level, for me it's a challenge to bring increasing and ever-changing insights to practical areas of activity, like the need to balance my music work and animal care work
12. To keep "samata" under conditions which are the very negation of the Auroville ideal
13. Auroville is a mirror reflecting your own truth like nowhere else
14. Whatever the difficulties, I am in Auroville to learn what it means: Auroville's "raison d'être" is to hasten the manifestation of the Supramental Force
15. To be identified with the real Spirit constantly. One can easily be given by the pull and push of different energies; otherwise they are brought here for their ultimate unity. It is a challenge to remain centered always
16. Basically, I am something like what you call a "SADHAK" some progress is made. Now I should put more efforts and concentration to bring down higher and higher consciousness into my physical and into people around me
17. I find that the most challenging part of living here is to stay true to the "dream" and the real purpose of Auroville—especially when surrounded by others who are obviously having the same challenge
18. Finding out the connection between the inner condition and outer event and then do the needed inner work
19. To overcome and work constantly on my own weaknesses and shortcomings
20. Growth
21. I would say everything, in the same way I would say I find challenging living anywhere else in the world
22. Daily insecurities and my own limited nature
23. Sometimes the day to day living (then forget why I am here)
24. To be able to manage, to be free
25. Living in Auroville is a challenge for me
26. Compare to other women (girls) from the village, I can see myself a different soul. I am her child. So this is my place
27. That doesn't mean life is easy here. You are often "turned upside down and inside out"

Interpersonal Factors

Inter-Cultural Differences With the Local Population

1. The animosity of the surrounding villagers, growing disrespect from the local people
2. The people from the bioregion
3. To learn how to behave in a different culture (Indian). To get respect for the way how they live
4. To express myself in another language

5. Keep Auroville from converting into a Tamil town
6. Bad crazy fast drivers
7. Not enough concern for the environment & locals
8. I would love to see ever more action in the direction of creating harmony with the villages with whom we share this bio-region
9. The relation between Aurovilians and villagers

Interpersonal Challenges Within the Auroville Community

1. Relation between the Aurovilians
2. Also the divide that seems to be occurring on the basis of nationality which Mother said we should go beyond. We should only refer to being an “Aurovilian” and not to being a Frenchman, German, Russian, Indian, Tamil, Westerner, European or whatever. All these are background details of no relevance to the realization of human unity. In fact, by using such labels we risk moving backwards, no forwards to our goal. Being an Englishman is less important to me than being as Aurovilian, with all that the latter implies and demands of me
3. Apathy or a lack of community participation of many residents
4. We cannot trust our “leaders” and we share not enough. Evolve housing : if we have hundred (if not thousands) of one room flat (or house) available freely for young and new people who like to work, share and progress without having to earn money before settling. It will be a very good thing as they would give themselves completely of accommodation, food and clothes are taken care of by Auroville
5. Too much emphasis on planning infrastructure
6. Money and power”—slowly getting settled. There is a general idea that everyone could construct the community in a visible way. Then what is the difference between outside and here? Everywhere including in families trying to live this way. Hard working (visible) is immediately recognized and rewarded everywhere (for the fortunate ones). Youth struggle to carry on their lives between the dreams and realities
7. Individual ego in front, too many leaders, danger of misleading freedom
8. The energy of the community is very much spent on establishing its name rather than proceed with what is supposed to be done
9. There is no real justice when there are deep problems. Many people in “power” positions don’t actually have good will but do have very big egos. This aspect of Auroville is discouraging. There is corruption and dysfunction like anywhere else in the world and when I discovered this I realized how naive I was, as I so wanted the dream
10. The fact that even after 40 years we have not agreed about how to disagree and as a result there are some very nasty things going on with our governance
11. No Politics. Everybody should work for Auroville. None of us should start their own business
12. Not too much is shared in my opinion

13. Not much collective living. Still too selfish and individual interest regarding persons, family and group dynamics
14. The daily interaction with other Aurovilians, that is quite conflicting. In a project of this nature we can expect a big amount of conflicts and misunderstandings but to face it daily is quite challenging
15. I live years ago in other community (outside India). Here is more individual work and I miss the cooperation here to work together, and how to organize this here
16. When I meet people who I've never met. Because "what is she/he up to)" thought bothers me a lot. To create trust takes a long time
17. Many things. The occasional moralistic/judgmental tendencies; often a surprising lack of clear, conscious, positive communication
18. Manifesting sincere understanding, collaboration and love. Making up with each other. Overcoming resistances in ourselves and in work and relationship. We lack here understanding, love compassion. Instead of emulating ourselves to progress together as brothers and sisters, we rather fight against each other
19. That constantly you are getting judged and judging others
20. Egotism in dealing with each other where one would expect more, considering our shared ideals
21. The negative feelings held by Aurovilians against other Aurovilians
22. 'Challenging' about living here is the lack of decision-making, the lack of openness, the lack of sincerity, the differences in material well-being not leading to respect, love and understanding each other, but to jealousy and social problems
23. The lack of heart. There seems to be an emotional hole in Auroville and I do not feel that I can express myself emotionally
24. Often I miss the "sharing" from the heart among us, the subtle love— language, the smiles, the recognition that we are, in fact, brothers and sisters
25. Lack of a shared commitment to conscious, compassionate communication: not feeling/experiencing a shared depth of intention to confront both our personal and collective shadow and to actively move forward/through it—i.e. to dissemble the 'stories' we live by
26. I have a fear that we will not succeed because of our inability to agree
27. I miss too often the regard to dignity of man. (sorry for my bad English)
28. The big confusion in which we are living right now as community
29. The collective dimension of this experiment
30. The lack of friendship and friendliness among Aurovilians
31. The small-mindedness of some Aurovilians
32. The village character, the gossip, greed
33. I would also enjoy more community-wide celebration of what is being achieved
34. If you are old like me (80 years), you have to learn to be alone, but that is the part of the game. I like to be here!
35. Interaction with other people

36. The collective community life
37. Auroville in general—Reconciliation of opposing view/opinions etc.
38. The people
39. That it can turn out to be just like any other town or become the cradle of the superman and center of a Gnostic society
40. Collective confusion, disunity
41. Things take a long time to get going and even then they don't always go where we want them to go. Auroville is still quite a small community; I sometimes find it challenging to find people with common interests and things to do for fun
42. I would like to see more young people in Auroville with fresh ideas and new information which will help Auroville evolve into its future
43. The names of groups (communities) often contradict themselves
44. Living closely with people of different temperament
45. The diversity of new opinions, beliefs, aspirations, cultural backgrounds
46. Living with people from different social, cultural etc. background is a real challenge
47. To live in another language, which give a lot of insecurity in understanding and thinking
48. Communications with the awareness that we have good and bad, the Mahabharata, in ourselves and the awareness that so many Aurovilians come with not enough knowledge of English
49. Needed is also support to have time and possibility to learn English for better communication
50. To try and live with people of various background and lifestyle
51. To settle down “personality” in an “own” way, in an unknown nature and society
52. To bring people together to do some work (the diversity among people is a richness but also poses a lot of difficulties)
53. To find harmony in the work atmosphere with people from such different nationalities, cultures, education and backgrounds
54. The challenge of living with people from all over the world and loving everyone as they are
55. The diversity of opinion, the multi faceted nature of our species mingling with clarity, discipline and sincerity
56. The vast variety of people with very different intentions for being in Auroville
57. The diversity/chaos/different views of needs/confrontation with India
58. The different background we are all coming from
59. Our inability to agree our ways to accomplish a truly successful collective, that is lack of human unity
60. The selfishness of way we have adopted to live on this sacred red soil, Auroville
61. How can we ever forget that it is Sri Aurobindo & the Mother that let us taste this experiment?

62. To manifest Auroville's ideals and aspirations in oneself and within the community. The lack of cohesion and unity in implementing the Vision and the resulting in-fighting, disagreements, and accusations
63. The lack of coherence between many of our daily common practices and our ideals
64. A majority of people live here on their own reasons such as comfortable living, individual living, as against what the Mother said
65. A majority of people here for material benefit, rather than aspiring for higher life. It disturbs me and forces me to divert from the inner life
66. Unless everyone reads Sri Aurobindo and Mother's work and understand what this experiment is all about. Auroville will continue to ape Western society. It would have been better for many to stay in their countries of birth, than to come here to re-create worst people like I have fled!
67. We are facing today many problems but underlining all of them I think that we have only one: the practice of a very superficial spirituality that only is coloring our collective life and is incapable of transforming it deeply
68. The obligation to overcome all our difficulties, in a total surrender. Whatever we dislike, heat or noise or misbehaviors, we have to accept, for the love of the Divine who has brought us here. So progress is very quick
69. They [Western Aurovilians] want to keep us [Tamil women] down. The foreigners all like the management jobs, but they don't want us to learn and progress. They just want us to do routine work like cleaning. In the beginning, it was different, we all worked together, and I learnt so many things. Now, if I want to learn how to use the computer, they say, "you can't do that." If I want to learn something new, it should be encouraged
70. They [Western Aurovilians] prefer to hire someone from the outside, than give us [Tamil women] a job
71. Even though we are all Aurovilians, we are not treated equally. They [Western Aurovilians] try to control us [Tamil women]. To check and re-check our work. They don't believe us. But if a Westerner makes mistakes, they forgive that
72. They [Western Aurovilians] only like us [Tamil women] when we smile and do our work quietly. If we are open in speaking up our minds, they don't like that
73. Even after so many years of being an Aurovilian, they [Western Aurovilians] still ask me whether I am a newcomer or guest
74. I told her [a Western Aurovilian in a managerial position] that I too was an Aurovilian and she had no right to question the decisions I took about my work. She takes leave when she needs to, so why shouldn't I?
75. Friends and relatives of Aurovilians should be treated with respect. But even if you are married to an Aurovilian, they don't recognize that—there are all these rules
76. The lack of enlightened Aurovilians . . . many people are too serious

Transpersonal Factors

1. Building the Bridge between the past—present—future
2. Dream of the Mother
3. Fulfilling Mother's dream
4. We are far from realizing Mother dream
5. Everything—because we have to learn everything and [word indecipherable] how to be kind, how to serve
6. Everything is still a “challenge” ...; to learn to become more and more plastic in their hands to surrender to die constantly, to enter in the “Eternal youth”
7. This broadest possible perspective [i. e., Auroville looks at life from the broadest perspective] is continually challenged by the narrowness characteristic of human nature
8. Everything is routine. I appreciate that Aurovilians are doing wonderful work for township development. But still I feel the real spiritual progress as envisaged by Mother and Sri Aurobindo is yet to be brought in. Some efforts please are made to promote yoga
9. Try to concentrate the vision of Auroville. Newcomers has to know about the “concept” of Auroville. We have to provide the proper education about Auroville and Sri Aurobindo and Mother
10. Human Unity
11. Living together with harmony
12. Try to understand the Divine life
13. The challenge of trying to live a higher truer like a more spiritual life as we, more hopefully—forward to be ideal of “Human Unity in Diversity”
14. The ever elusive goal for human unity
15. The constant process leading to something more true, an individual and collective level

Other Factors

1. Material conditions
2. Going past the material comfort we have now
3. Change
4. The impossibility
5. The uncertainty of the future through threats from the outside and within. Maybe they are just more terrible here than they would be elsewhere, because our world here is so small
6. Many possibilities to do negative things
7. Life
8. Life itself
9. The early days it was so difficult to live here. Now it is still difficult but on another level
10. That “Nalaki” never comes and, almost everything

ⁱ All factual information on Auroville throughout the dissertation, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from the official Auroville website (Auroville, n.d.). An exact URL is provided for all direct quotes taken from the website. All opinions, unless explicitly stated otherwise, are that of the researcher's and based on participant-observation.

ⁱⁱ Term for a formally accepted resident of Auroville and legally recognized as such by the Government of India. The idiosyncratic spelling with one "l" instead of two was given by the Mother herself (Alfassa, 2000, p. 276).

ⁱⁱⁱ These three texts were repeatedly identified by my informants as sources of inspiration and are thus included here as Appendices A, B, and C respectively.

^{iv} Here I follow Max Weber's definition of charisma as "a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he [sic] is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or quality" (Parsons, 1964, p. 358). In his theory of social organization and domination, Weber recognized charismatic authority of a Divinely-inspired leader as being a special kind of legitimizing authority.

^v The names of all my informants have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The informants whom I personally interviewed were either part of a pilot study or of the main study. To distinguish between the two categories of interviewees, I identify the interviewees of the pilot study by a single letter, from A to E, and those of the main study by the following pseudonyms: Carol, Kalai, Oliver, Sarah, Sonia, and Swaminathan. Transcripts of these interviews are available upon request, and I do not include a parenthetical citation to indicate the date of the interview. This distinguishes my formal interviewees from other casual informants, whose information is always referenced by a parenthetical citation.

^{vi} Finding reliable biographies of mystics and spiritual saints is a common problem encountered in the religious studies. Most such biographies tend to be written by disciples and consequently suffer from being hagiographies, rather than scholarly, historical documents. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are no exception to this rule. Heehs' (1989) biographical monograph of Sri Aurobindo is the most scholarly work currently available though Iyengar's (1972) biography is also to be recommended for its wealth of detail. A more comprehensive biography by Heehs was released in 2008 after the writing of this dissertation. Van Vrekhem's (2000) and Iyengar's (1994) are the most detailed biographies of the Mother currently available. As researching primary documents about Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's life history was beyond the scope of this dissertation, I draw my biographical material from the aforementioned published texts.

^{vii} "Sri" is a common honorific title signifying respect in India. Among Indian mystics, who assume this title or are referred to thus by their followers, the designation indicates a certain level of spiritual development. In Sri Aurobindo's case, the title was both increasingly used by him and his followers in 1926, the year he went into seclusion. And from 1930 onwards, Aurobindo Ghose is only known as Sri Aurobindo. References to Sri Aurobindo's writings are listed under Ghose in this dissertation.

^{viii} Indian women mystics are commonly addressed as *mā*, which means *Mother*. Sri Aurobindo's and later usage in the tradition of prefixing the address with the article, "the" is adhered to in this dissertation.

^{ix} *Routinization of charisma* refers to a sociological process toward institutionalization, identified by Weber (1968), where with the death of a charismatic leader the initial enthusiasm of the followers is replaced by their pragmatic need to make a living leading to a more structured organization.

^x Given the fact that humanity has acquired the power to alter atmospheric conditions of the planet (Kaku, 1994) and to determine the living conditions of other species (Swimme and Berry, 1992), the welfare of the Earth community depends directly on human knowledge and wisdom.

^{xi} There is neither irrefutable proof nor consensus among scientists about the exact process of evolution. The evolutionary process, especially the emergence of life on Earth, remains a scientific conundrum.

^{xii} Systems theory, which originated in the field of physical sciences, is now an interdisciplinary field that analyzes and describes systems—any group of objects that work in concert to produce some result—in nature, society, and science.

^{xiii} A dynamic open system, also referred to as a *dissipative system* in thermodynamics, is a system that is far from a state of equilibrium and open to exchanges of matter and energy with its environment. The system, to a certain extent, tolerates random fluctuations in the flows of energy and matter. However, if there are extreme fluctuations the system becomes chaotic and either collapses or reorganizes itself as a more complex system of a higher order. Only dynamic open systems are capable of evolution (Jantsch, 1980). *Chaos and complexity theories* now mathematically conceptualize the processes in such systems (Cambel, 1993). While the exact mathematical criteria for determining the behavior of a system to be chaotic may not be met by many living systems, evolutionary thinkers, such as Combs (1996) and Haught (2003), broadly use the terms chaos and complexity to understand processes in biological systems.

^{xiv} The term *autopoiesis*, first introduced by Maturana and Varela in the 1970s, is often used to describe self-organization in all systems. Strictly speaking though an autopoietic system is a self-replicating, autonomous, operationally closed system that does not exchange matter and energy with its environment (Laszlo, 1987).

^{xv} By the phrase the "logic of the Infinite," Sri Aurobindo (Ghose, 1972a) refers to the working of the Divine Spirit. Contrasting it with the rational working of the human mind or the "logic of the finite" (p. 334), he writes: "But the being and action of the Infinite must not be therefore regarded as if it were a magic void of all reason; there is, on the contrary, a greater reason in all the operations of the Infinite, but it is not a mental or intellectual, it is a spiritual and supramental reason: there is a logic in it, because there are relations and connections infallibly seen and executed; what is magic to our finite reason is the logic of the Infinite. It is a greater reason, a greater logic because it is more vast, subtle, complex in its operations: it comprehends all the data which our observation fails to seize, it deduces from them results which neither our deduction nor induction can

anticipate, because our conclusions and inferences have a meagre foundation and are fallible and brittle” (p. 329).

^{xvi} Sri Aurobindo’s concept of involution, while not scientifically accepted, is not contradicted either by common scientific knowledge, best paraphrased by Laszlo (1987), that given certain specific conditions, which were prevalent on Earth about four billion years ago, the complex molecules of amino acids, the basic building blocks of life spontaneously form themselves. However, for life to have risen out of inanimate matter, and indeed for the universe to have unfolded the way it did, physical and chemical conditions needed to be so precisely met that scientists refer to it as the “Goldilocks Effect” (Lovelock, 1987). Sri Aurobindo and many evolutionary biologists are dismissive of extraterrestrial origins of life.

^{xvii} On this issue, my data shows that many Aurovilians experience a lack of fraternity and are often hurt by interpersonal dynamics within Auroville. In a subsequent chapter, I analyze these research findings as being a shadow of Auroville’s ideals of “human unity” and “a true community.”

^{xviii} People formally accepted as residents of Auroville on a provisional basis, after which they are declared as Aurovilians.

^{xix} Ideological *communitas* is the notion, made popular by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), of the feeling of togetherness among relative strangers due to a shared ideology.

^{xx} Culture here is defined simply as “shared understandings” (Swartz & Jordan, 1976).

^{xxi} A transdisciplinary approach or transdisciplinarity is both a unified approach to life and a research principle that advocates the integration of knowledge. While the term transdisciplinarity was first introduced by Piaget in 1970s, it has been given a new currency in the late 1980s by European researchers, such as Edgar Morin and Basarab Nicolescu, associated with the International Center for Transdisciplinary Research. Transdisciplinarity aims at understanding the contemporary world through an overarching unity of knowledge: “As the prefix *trans* indicates, transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines” (Nicolescu, 2002, p. 44). Multidisciplinarity (simultaneous research in several disciplines) and interdisciplinarity (transfer of epistemologies and applications of knowledge from one discipline to the other) overflow disciplinary boundaries, but their goals do not transcend the framework of disciplinary research; Transdisciplinarity complements disciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, but its goal of comprehending the real world by necessity transcends all research frameworks and disciplines.

^{xxii} The quotation read: “The next greatest rapture to the love of God is the love of God in men; there, too, one has the joy of multiplicity” (Sri Aurobindo, 1998a, p. 483).

^{xxiii} Given the wide range of methodological parameters and other factors that affect different forms of research, there is no consensus on what constitutes an acceptable response rate in social and psychological research and “a demonstrated lack of response bias is far more important than a high response rate” (Babbie, 2002, p. 260). The validity

of survey results depends directly on whether or not the respondents were representative of the entire population under assessment. As discussed in the sections on “Assumptions” and “Reliability and validity,” I have strong reason to believe that the youth and Tamil population did not respond to my survey. Consequently, I sought to reduce this response bias by specifically targeting these groups while conducting my oral interviews. Mailed questionnaires, like mine, can vary tremendously in terms of length of format. As opposed to a multiple-choice questionnaire, a questionnaire such as mine requiring descriptive answers demands more time of the participant and hence are likely to have lower response rates. Historically, for some reason, unless it is an important issue that affects the immediate working of the whole community, surveys of the Auroville population have had low response rates. For example, a ballot survey conducted in March 2007 by a community-approved group to determine organizational policies drew only 76 responses.

^{xxiv} The handwritten responses to the survey were typed in. As far as possible, the integrity of the text was maintained, and no corrections were made to erroneous spelling or punctuation.

^{xxv} The limitations of the electronic counter that is used in *AV Net* to count the number of people visiting a web page prevent more precise estimates.

^{xxvi} On this issue of nomenclature, it can be noted that from an emic perspective, members of an intentional community generally do not like the term utopia because of its historical connotation as being an imaginary, unattainable place. Also, as Winter (2006) points out, the term brings to mind the totalitarian vision of twentieth-century dictators, particularly Hitler and Stalin, who sought to impose their ideas of a perfect society by ruthlessly exterminating those they deemed as opposing their vision, though strictly speaking, in retrospect, these were *dystopias* and not utopias. Communes are generally regarded as small experiments with no more than 25 members (Abrams & McCullough, 1976).

^{xxvii} The General Assembly of UNESCO unanimously passed four resolutions of support for Auroville in 1966, 1968, 1970 and 1983 inviting “member states and international non-governmental organizations to participate in the development of Auroville as an international cultural township designed to bring together the values of different cultures and civilizations in a harmonious environment with integrated living standards which correspond to man’s physical and spiritual needs” (Auroville Universal Township, n.d., para. 4).

^{xxviii} In a conversation, the Mother says, “It [Auroville] may take a hundred years, it may take a thousand years, I don’t know, but Auroville will be because it is decreed” (Auroville Press, n.d., p. 34).

^{xxix} Information attributed to the Mother in this paragraph is taken from unpublished manuscripts, which are compilations of all references to Auroville made by the Mother (including unpublished handwritten notes and unrecorded conversations) in the years 1970 and 1971 respectively.

^{xxx} It could be noted here that, apart from the Matrimandir management group, the Matrimandir is not institutionally sanctified by any governing structure in Auroville. Historically, starting with the importance that the Mother gave to the building, there has

been hegemonic understanding of the sacredness of Matrimandir but this understanding is far more socio-cultural than institutional. Aurovilians environmentalists have often publicly decried the construction of this extravagant building, which has had a considerable environmental impact.

^{xxx} It needs to be pointed out that given the continued hegemony of the modern outlook in mainstream society, contemporary spiritual expressions are negatively viewed by the press resulting in the fact that most people are reluctant to publicly admit of their involvement in spiritual practices (Forman, 2004)

^{xxxii} It could be noted here that the Mother (Alfassa, 1981) preferred to use the word *Divine* over *spiritual* because she felt that the latter term, particularly in its usage in French, implied a rejection of the material world.

^{xxxiii} For a thorough discussion of the political and legal usage of the terms religious, spiritual and secular, in reference to Auroville within the nation-state of India, see Minor (1999).

^{xxxiv} It has to be noted here, however, that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother regarded their own evolutionary work, in the highest terms, as “an Action from the Supreme [emphasis in original]” (Alfassa, 1978, p. 69). In numerous letters, Sri Aurobindo (1970) clearly regarded Integral Yoga as one of many possible spiritual paths, stating that different paths led to different goals. And yet, Sri Aurobindo, like his contemporary Teilhard de Chardin, undoubtedly saw evolution as “a general condition, which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must submit to and satisfy . . . in order to be conceivable and true” (1955/1999, p. 152).

^{xxxv} At the moment, while there are a number of groups who seek to explore these concepts in the contexts of their nations, there is still a lack of clarity in Auroville as how best to develop this zone of the city. At present, only India and Tibet have established pavilions.

^{xxxvi} For a thorough deconstruction of the concept that religious practices are predicated on beliefs see Asad, 1993.

^{xxxvii} For instance, on the issue of the power human intent, anthropologist Wallace (1956) maintains that certain changes in a society can happen within a generation because of the explicit intentions held by the members of the society.

^{xxxviii} Aurovilians generally use just their first name, even in their publications. Last names are used to distinguish between people having the same first name. I follow this practice in my dissertation.

^{xxxix} This figure of 3,000 just gives an idea of what is called the summer exodus in Auroville. It does not accurately reflect the number of Aurovilians who travel abroad each year for the number includes tourists visiting and excludes who buy their air-tickets from elsewhere.

^{xl} The Auroville Council, an elected group, occasionally assisted by a conflict-resolution group, deals with all internal and interpersonal problems in Auroville. But this group has

not always been deemed successful in its work, and their decisions are often challenged by the aggrieved parties who accuse it of being biased. At the time of writing this dissertation, there was a move to institute a mediation group in Auroville, based on mediation practices prevalent in the Indian justice system.

^{xli} V. Turner carefully distinguishes his concept of unstructured *communitas* from Durkheim's notion of solidarity. Societies that exhibit unstructured *communitas* are non-exclusive and their boundaries are, says V. Turner, "ideally coterminous with those of the human species. *Communitas* is in this respect strikingly different from Durkheimian 'solidarity,' the force of which depends upon an in-group/out-group contrast" (1969, p. 132).

^{xlii} I am alluding here to class distinctions among Aurovilians. There is a clear hierarchy between Aurovilian managers and hired labor; a fact that upsets many Western visitors to Auroville.

^{xliii} My research here focuses solely on internal relationships within Auroville and not on Auroville's relationship to the outside world. Pillai (2005) points out that Auroville's external image is socially constructed by groups wielding power in the community.

^{xliv} An exception to this fact is homophobia: While I have not investigated this sensitive issue directly, through chance conversations with Aurovilians, I gathered that, because of archaic Indian laws and cultural views about homosexuality, there was a certain degree of homophobia in the community. Homosexuality, in other words, seems to have been influenced by the Indian milieu and socially constructed in Auroville.

^{xlv} North Indians, that is Indians from outside of Tamil Nadu, have also reported that, on occasion, they have experienced the behavior and language of Westerners as being racist (e.g., see Mohanty, 2001). But North Indians, because of the educated, urbanized background that they come from seem to relate to Westerners more on an equal footing. There is a growing divide between people from North and South India, but this is based on socio-cultural factors of education, status and economic power and not on race.

^{xlvi} Ray's and Anderson's (2000) research is the best documented study of the change in social values in USA.

^{xlvii} For a deeper insight into the promises and challenges of a globalized society, see Winter (2006, pp. 169-203).

^{xlviii} Technology is defined here not just as the usage of a mechanical tool but as "the instrumentality that imbues all human activities and extends human powers to act on nature and interact with others" (Laszlo, 1987, pp. 92-93).

^{xlix} This trend where society reorganizes itself around the technology it uses is based on the fact that the adopted technology marks an increase in the efficiency of production procedures (Laszlo, 1987), and because of the increased efficiency this becomes the dominant trend for the evolution of societies all over the world. However, there can be exceptions to this trend: According to Swimme, aboriginal hunter-gatherer societies existing in certain parts of Africa today do not see the need for adopting agricultural technology (personal communication, March 5, 2008).

ⁱ The main brunt of Wilber's work and his schematic representation of evolution suggest a parallel unfolding of evolution in all the four aspects of life. As I have argued elsewhere (see Mohanty, 2003a), I disagree with this premise. While there is always an inherent connection and mutual influence of the subjective and objective dimensions of life, development, whether in the individual or in society, is far more complex and convoluted. There is evidence to believe, as I examine later in the chapter, that because of the self-reflexive consciousness of the human being, evolution can be spearheaded by the subjective dimension of life. Wilber occasionally reverts to this view, notably in his 1995 description of the emergence of a planetary culture.

ⁱⁱ Given the plethora of meanings that the term "postmodern" has accrued, I prefer M. King's term of postsecular spirituality to Griffin's (1988) usage of constructive postmodernism to define the contemporary spiritual society.

ⁱⁱⁱ Such a symbolic stage of life can also be glimpsed in ancient Greek, Egyptian and Celtic cultures, which were steeped in occult mysteries and led by a priestly class (Ghose, 1971).

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ A case in point here is the fact that, in 1968, 125 nations agreed to the Charter of Auroville, including countries, such as capitalistic USA, communist USSR, as well as France and Germany—countries that had been historically at war with each other for centuries.

^{lv} It needs to be borne in mind that the term *evolution* is both generally used to indicate a developmental process over time, and also specifically used, in a more scientific sense, to indicate the processes of self-organization, complexity and spontaneous emergence that characterizes growth in a complex system. My research indicates Auroville to be a complex evolutionary system, but it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to compare the evolutionary process of Auroville with the development of other religious orders and societies, which may or may not be evolutionary in their unfolding in the scientific sense of the word.

^{lv} As a case in point to show how Auroville transpersonal ideals as "objects of sociality" shape human intentionality, I would like to again cite one of my survey respondents who said, "Auroville's raison d'être makes one have so many more responsibilities on oneself—so hard on oneself" (Appendix F).

^{lvi} Institutionally, barring certain rigid and bureaucratic tendencies in the present organization, Aurovilians enjoy a great deal of freedom in conducting their lives. Some Aurovilians, however, upholding the ideal of celibacy as institutionalized by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, are disdainful of sexuality in all its expressions. Similarly, a simplistic lifestyle is implicitly advocated as a spiritual value. Thus, while it is rarely explicitly stated or contested in public arenas, the overriding cultural message is that monogamy, or even celibacy, and simplicity should be the sociocultural norms of Auroville. Here, as with practically every other aspect of Auroville's life, there exists a dialectical tension between transcendental spiritual ideals and everyday practice.

^{lvii} For an excellent short introduction to the Mother's unusual life, and Aurovilians' widely divergent perspectives about her, see "Chapter 5: The Mother of Auroville" (Pillai, 2005).

^{lviii} Outlandish as the idea may seem to our rational sense that physical matter can exhibit different properties, the growing *string theory* in quantum mechanics offers a similar notion. String theory, building on Einstein's relativity theory that establishes time as the fourth dimension (the other three being the spatial dimension of length, breadth and height), puts forward the hypothesis that there are actually ten or more dimensions governing the mechanics of quantum particles and the universe. Just as much as the properties of matter change in the fourth dimension of time, as proven by Einstein, similarly in additional dimensions, matter would exhibit completely different properties. String theory is still in the process of being empirically tested in the laboratory and scientists cannot even begin to describe the nature of matter in a universe of ten or more dimensions (Kaku, 1994). Interestingly, the Mother, while explaining that the Divine presence exists in a plane of consciousness beyond the three dimensions of matter, alludes to the multidimensional reality of quantum mechanics:

If you come to the Divine Presence in the atom . . . you touch so infinitesimal a domain . . . that you can no longer distinguish between two, three, four or five dimensions. The movements constituting an atom are, in the matter of size, so imperceptible that they cannot be understood with our three-dimensional understanding, the more so as they follow laws which elude completely this three-dimensional idea. (Alfassa, 1972, pp. 139-40)

^{lix} I believe that this is could be due to the limitations of my methodology, for during the course of my study, I came across a preliminary study done by an Aurovilian that sought to phenomenologically describe the opening of the soul or the psychic being among fifteen Aurovilians and people connected to Auroville (Anonymous, 2004). While, this latter study could have benefited from a more methodological approach and analysis, it nevertheless indicates an important spiritual dimension of Auroville.

^{lx} Many Aurovilians felt that a commune of largely French people, colloquially known as the Mirramukhi group, who had shared lifestyle practices, such as wearing white, increasingly became cultish in their behavior. The group went back to France out of its own accord, but some of the group members estranged themselves from their families in Auroville.

^{lxi} I myself had been part of such a group with certain minimal practices, namely collective meditation and optional verbal sharing for a short while in the 1980s. While the practice was not as deep or beneficial as my individual meditation practice, counseling sessions, or self-development workshops I had, it nevertheless opened another avenue of participating in the yoga, namely a relational avenue. I know that such a group as I describe currently exists in Auroville but I did not gain access to them. I also readily admit that such a group could collectively engage in spiritual bypassing and/or, if governed by strong leaders, degenerate into cultish behavior.

^{lxii} Roger Anger passed away in January 2008 as I was working on this dissertation.