

# Embodiment of Sustainability in Auroville



An anthropological account of human-nature relations and sustainable behaviour in an intentional community in India

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The banyan tree has a sacred meaning in India and is of special value to Auroville. The tree in the picture is regarded as the geographical centre of Auroville. “Banyans have the peculiarity of producing aerial roots which grow down from the branches towards the ground and take root to become new trunks.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, the banyan is always expanding and sustaining itself.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.auroville.org/contents/2139>

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Prologue.....	5
Introduction .....	7
1. Community – challenges.....	15
1.1 Auroville .....	15
1.2 Views on Sustainable Development .....	17
1.3 Spirituality and sustainability.....	19
1.4 Ecovillage .....	22
1.5 Conclusion.....	24
2. Nature – lifestyle and attitudes .....	25
2.1 The role of nature in the culture of Auroville: tree planting .....	25
2.2 The experience of nature: change of lifestyle .....	27
2.3 Attitudes towards nature.....	29
2.4 Conclusion.....	32
3. Self – agency .....	33
3.1 Disappointments.....	34
3.2 Sustainable Lifestyle.....	35
3.3 Sustainable initiatives .....	38
3.4 Agency.....	41
3.5 Conclusion.....	43
Conclusion.....	44
Bibliography .....	50
Appendix I .....	54
Appendix II .....	56

# Abstract

Environmental degradation requires cultural change, of our anthropocentric worldview, our capitalist economy and our consumer lifestyle. Ecovillages are challenging experiments for such a transformation. Embodiment of sustainability is a concept I coin to investigate how ecovillagers internalise and display a worldview and lifestyle focused on sustainability. Such an embodiment encompasses connectedness to nature, agency of the self, and collective engagement of the community. Central to the concept is the human body, which holds responsibility for and creates visible footsteps towards a more sustainable lifestyle.

I investigated the sustainability of daily live in Auroville, India. This town is an intentional community with a hybrid character. Auroville has a quite a strong culture of individualism. Furthermore, its focus on human unity is spiritually rooted while its firm tradition of reforestation is accompanied by environmental awareness. The spiritual roots of Auroville simultaneously further and impede sustainable behaviour. Despite environmental disappointments, committed Aurovilians keep on putting effort in a multitude of sustainable initiatives concerning nature as well as the community.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Intentional Community, Ecovillage, Nature, Body, Embodiment, Behaviour Change, Agency.

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I want to thank Nienke Muurling for supervising this thesis and guiding me through the process. I appreciated her new perspectives and personal involvement.

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Without them my thesis would not be as it is now.

# Prologue

As a child, I enjoyed observing trees, flowers and insects and was shocked when I saw people harming them. I also did not understand why people would waste water or food. As I grew older, I learned more and more about the impact we have on our environment, and I constantly changed my lifestyle accordingly. Still, it is my goal to find the most sustainable lifestyle and to be the least harmful to myself and all that surrounds me. For me, my body is a tool to convey my opinion, to show the world my worldview, to change the world. By upholding a sustainable lifestyle, I tell the world that I care about the environment and that I do not consider the common human needs to be more important than those of other living creatures. Once you practice what you preach, people will understand you better and may become inspired to do the same. By consciously trying to align my behaviour to my worldview, it becomes embodied. My aim with this thesis is to show a new perspective on the human body; one which entails that sustainability can be embodied. At the same time I argue for a more inclusive and less anthropocentric (human-centred) worldview. I hope to raise awareness and to inspire people to act in a more sustainable way, with respect for all that surrounds us, in order to live a more balanced life.

This thesis was a quest for me on how to ‘incorporate’ the body in scientific research. Senses play an important role in our experience of the world; without them we would not be able to perceive anything. Nevertheless, we find it difficult to speak about our senses. In ‘the West’ the sense of sight clearly dominates (Ingold 2011:45), also in anthropology, where observation is an important tool. I sought to explore a wider spectrum of experience, triggering new and different bodily sensations in the process. In Auroville I practised yoga, somatics, free dance, and I walked barefoot. I discovered that touch is an omnipresent sense in Auroville. Influenced by the Indian culture, people tend to eat with their right hand and use their left hand to clean themselves after using the toilet. It depends per person to what extent they incorporate this into their lives; some Aurovilians stick to their culturally ingrained behaviour, while others deliberately adopt new forms of behaviour. I too learned the technique of eating with my right hand, mixing rice and sauce with my fingertips, cupping my fingers to bring the food to my mouth and pushing it into my mouth using my thumb. This is a special act; but westerners are not used to touching food, to feeling its texture and temperature. Eating with one’s hand provides us with knowledge of our food that we are not used to. It also breaks down our cultural barrier to ‘uncivilised eating’, since we are used to distancing our body from the food we eat by using cutlery as an intermediary.



# Introduction

*“You can see how you treat nature by how you treat your body. The trash you have is mainly beauty products and food wrappings”. ~ Girl on the bus to Sadhana Forest*

*“I think people are more aware here of the global balance of life and that sports and taking good care of your body is also part of the global balance. [...] [M]any people go around by bicycle because it's good for the body, it's good for the planet, it's easy because distances are not big inside Auroville. It's like a global balance between what you eat, what you do, and also what you do with your reason for your body. And here people have more this holistic view of life. For me it's obvious that our environment and what we do, what we eat, the people we meet, all that influences how we feel and who we are.” ~ Mathilde<sup>2</sup>*

## **Towards a culture of sustainability**

We are living in the Anthropocene: a time in which human interference has become “a geological force capable of affecting all life on this Planet” (Braidotti 2013:5). Concerning environmental degradation, humans can be regarded as the core of the problem, but also as the core of the solution. Most humans, at least in the western world, hold an anthropocentric worldview, in which they often “see themselves as the ultimate form of life on earth, as either the ‘apogee of evolution’ or as created in the ‘image’ of god, and thus having ‘dominion’ or ‘stewardship’ over the planet” (Morris 2004:1). As Milton (1993:12) argues, future generations and non-human species are vulnerable and influenced by our lifestyle; they are dependent on our decisions. The principle of sustainable living “reflects the duty of care for other people and other forms of life, now and in the future.” (IUCN et al. 1991:9 in Argyrou 2005:49).

According to Berkhout, the notion of the Anthropocene enables us to transform the relation between humans and nature, as it embeds people “into Earth systems” (2014:154). Deep ecologists provide such an inclusive worldview; they see humans as part of nature and equal to all beings, and nature as the origin of everything (Foss 2009:9). Seeing “the Earth as a being” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004:86) is another way of overcoming the dualities between nature/culture and human/non-human that characterise the Western worldview. These dichotomies are often seen as the cause of the ecological crisis (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004:84, Lockyer and Veteto 2013:16, Simmons 2006:65, Foss 2009:9). In fact, “we are the environmental crisis” (Evernden 1985:128); we created it as a by-product of our capitalistic system and its focus on economic growth (Wright 2012:7; Forno 2015:9). Lockyer and Veteto (2013:1) suggest that we should look for solutions outside of the systems that created the problems; Adams (2006:10) states that we need “new concepts, new ideas, new ways of engaging

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<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted on 14-04-2017 with Mathilde, a French lady in her 30s who arrived in 2013.



citizens and opinion leaders". In order to be effective, the change should be cultural (Nolan 2009 in Castells, Caraça and Cardoso 2012:13, Evernden 1992:119, cf. Milton 1993:2). Adams (2016:13-14) suggests that "we need to plant a culture of sustainability."

One possible approach to sustainability is to strive for ecological citizenship: "citizens embodying their particular places of ecological experience with common concerns [...] potentially leading to expansive spatiotemporal horizons of responsible action" (Reid and Taylor 2000:440). This is comparable to ecovillagers, who "embody a mindful lifestyle, which can be continued indefinitely in the future. As such, they [...] [shape] a new culture, designed to restore the Earth and her people" (Jackson and Svensson 2002:5). Ecovillages present a viable alternative to consumer society with its destructive lifestyle. These communities are a subcategory of intentional communities: communities founded by and consisting of people living together to achieve a common goal and/or to solve a certain problem of the larger society (following Brown 2002:5, Andelson and Lockyer 2006:30, Kozeny 1995:18). Litfin (2009:132) regards ecovillages as an active attempt "to mend the modern split between people and the rest of nature by placing human existence within a holistic cosmology."

Reid and Taylor (2000:440) as well as Jackson and Svensson (2002:5) relate embodiment to ecological citizenship or ecovillagers. Embodiment is a "new holistic approach in which body, mind, and experience are brought together"; it "bridges over from the body as a source of perception into the realms of agency, practice, feeling, custom, the exercise of skills, performance" (Strathern and Stewart 2011:388-389). Embodiment is "the source of personhood, self, and subjectivity, and the precondition of intersubjectivity" (Mascia-Lees 2011:1). People are embodied by living their body, and not just by having a body (Toombs 1995). Embodiment is "a way of inhabiting the world" (Mascia-Lees 2011:1), a "mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas 1994:12). Our body represents our being in the world, our worldview and is the vehicle for perceiving and the self (Merleau-Ponty 1962:90, Lawton 2002:83). Embodiment should therefore be studied within its cultural context (Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 1992).

In 1994, Csordas remarks that those studying the body often take embodiment for granted. Mascia-Lees (2011) reports a shift in anthropology of the body towards studying embodiment, which has created a better intertwinement of theory and practice. The anthropology of the body dates back to the mid-1980s, but the perception of the body has changed and is now "understood as simultaneously subject and object, meaningful and material, individual and social and has served as the basis of a stunningly large number of inquiries in the discipline" (Mascia-Lees 2011:1). However, according to Humberstone (2013:568): "little work has been done to explore the embodiment, senses, and practice-in-nature nexus nor how this might lead to environmental awareness and action."

### **Embodiment of sustainability**

Embodiment of sustainability is a concept I coin to describe how people internalise and display a

worldview and lifestyle focused on sustainability. This lifestyle encompasses the alignment of thinking and feeling, of perceiving and performing, of being and doing. In my view, three aspects are important in the embodiment of sustainability: the social body, the natural body, and the self.

*The social body.* In 1934, Mauss wrote an in-depth article on bodily techniques in which he stresses the learned character of how we use our body; habits are learned and formed culturally. Mauss coined the term *habitus*, meaning that the social is embodied and internalised (Mauss 1973 [1934]). Similarly, in his discussion of the cultivated body Lock (1993) states that the biological body is constructed by “specific social, cultural, and historical contexts” (Lock 1993:134, cf. Douglas 1996:73 [1970]).

*The natural body.* Most authors also stress the importance of the interaction between the social and the biological body (Douglas 1970, Lock 1993, Giddens 1991, Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Turner 1980, Morris 2014:xviii). The natural body is embedded in a culture, but according to Douglas (1970) we should not neglect natural behaviour. Strathern and Stewart (2011:398) argue that it is not just other humans who influence our bodies; we also interact with our (non-human) environment, as humans are “closely connected with the landscapes [...] through which they move.” Research has been conducted on the effect of being in nature, which appears to have a calming and healing effect (Kahn et al. 2009, Hartig et al. 2014).

*The self.* Giddens (1991) discusses the importance of the will of the individual, an aspect which the aforementioned authors did not mention explicitly. In pre-modern culture, the self was a passive entity; someone’s appearance was strongly related to someone’s social identity. Later, however, the self and the body became more flexible and individualistic. Daily decisions result in “the temporal unfolding of self-identity” (Giddens 1991:14). In the same line, Bordo (1993:20) argues that the body is “a site of individual self-determination” and Lock and Farquhar (2007:6) state that the body is “an embodiment of consciousness and the site where intention, meaning, and all practice originate”. This implies a dialogue between agency and structure, between self-will and social boundaries. This interaction is shown in bodily practices, which “mediate a personal realization of social values” (after Jackson, Lock 1993:137). Morris (1994:12) similarly states that the self is a process: “The person as a self is a universal category, but its content and meaning is always in a sense unique to an individual person within a specific social context.”

In my view, the degree of sustainability of human behaviour is determined by a dynamic between self-will, social expectations and natural environment. Embodiment of sustainability requires engagement of the self (personal commitment) as well as connectedness to nature and to the community. The engagement of the self has to be permanent and progressive, and is expressed by taking responsibility for and care of the global ecosystem and all its aspects, as much as possible. The connectedness to nature is of course a matter of lifestyle, but also of an awareness that is inclusive (nature and all of its species), holistic (all ecological issues) and fundamental (all major causes). The

connectedness to the community is basically about engaging others (family, peers, co-inhabitants, strangers) in a common quest for a shared culture of sustainability.

### **Problem definition**

Auroville is an intentional community in the south of India, with the ambition of becoming *'the city the world needs'* by achieving human unity. Auroville has 2700 highly diverse inhabitants, though most of them have a strong interest in spirituality. The community started with reforestation efforts and there are several ecological projects. I became curious about how Aurovilians deal with climate change, what role nature plays and how they think about sustainability. This interest eventually led to the following research question: ***How is sustainability embodied by the inhabitants of the community of Auroville in India?***

My focus is on the human body and the responsibility it bears for its environment. I coin the term embodiment of sustainability to describe how people internalise and display a worldview and lifestyle focused on sustainability. This thesis investigates how this embodiment is related to community, nature and self. This main question is operationalised in the following fields with sub-questions:

#### *Community*

- What is the origin of Auroville, and what are its characteristics?
- How is sustainability both reinforced and challenged by Auroville's spirituality?
- To what extent can Auroville be regarded as an ecovillage?

#### *Nature*

- What role does the natural environment play in people's lives in Auroville?
- What lifestyle and attitudes are related to being in contact with nature?

#### *Self*

- How do individual ideals of sustainability give shape to the lifestyle and attitudes of Aurovilians?
- What sustainable initiatives do Aurovilians take and how do they express agency?

### **Scientific and societal relevance**

Research concerning the embodiment of sustainability provides the opportunity to be scientifically innovative as well as societal relevant. Following Lockyer and Veteto, this thesis strives to "narrow the gap between sustainability practices and academic ideals" (2008:53). My aim is to contribute to existing anthropological literature by investigating the relatively new fields of sustainability and ecovillages (cf. Wagner 2012:81). Furthermore, by connecting theories on the body and sustainability, I delve into a relatively underexplored relationship. I consciously choose the human body as a core focus, as a

powerful medium to change the world. Since we are hardly aware of our bodies in our daily activities (Diprose 1995:209), we tend to neglect this power.

This thesis tries to explore how sustainability can be embodied, and thereby how people can take responsibility for their behaviour affecting the environment. My aim is to show the importance of embodying a holistic and inclusive view on sustainability, to raise people's awareness that humans are part of the global ecosystem, and to stimulate people to take responsibility for our impact on nature and all its species, now and in the future. Milton (1993:6) argues that anthropology creates knowledge, "particularly on the ways in which people understand and interact with their environments, [which] could be of value in the search for solutions to environmental problems".

Auroville is a lens through which I view the bigger picture of dealing with climate change and ecological degradation. It is an example of how communities can deal with 'ecological' problems as the result of human behaviour. Ecovillages have impact by offering an alternative to the current way of life and by reaching out to a greater public (Dawson 2013:223). Litfin (2009:124-125) states that ecovillages are indeed worth studying: "if current human systems are unsustainable, it is prudent to look to those who are pioneering sustainable living practices. To ignore communities that are actually reducing their ecological footprints dramatically, that are creating models of sustainability literally from the ground up, would be intellectually negligent and pragmatically unwise". In this same line of reasoning, Lockyer and Veteto (2013:19) value ecovillages "as educational models and living laboratories of sustainability". They note the importance of anthropologists, who should engage and strengthen these initiatives concerning "ongoing efforts to build a sustainable world" (2013:3). Therefore, I decided to contribute to a better understanding of ecovillages and what we can learn from these intentional communities for a more sustainable way of life, from their achievements and their challenges, by means of ethnographic research.

## **Methods**

Anthropology is, as Ingold (2011:242) phrased it, "an inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world", with the objective to "seek a generous, comparative but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit" (Ingold 2011:279). My anthropological mind-set helps me to learn from the views and behaviour of other people. Anthropology is valuable, as it "opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being" (Ingold 2011:238). In this case, I am particularly interested in human possibilities concerning the embodiment of sustainability.

For fourteen weeks, starting in February 2017, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Auroville, Southeast India. In order to experience the community and to capture a variety of views, I lived in six different places, volunteered at seven farms (listed in the appendix) and participated in many workshops and other community activities. Researchers themselves are an important instrument

for anthropological research, which requires being aware of your own presence while conducting research. By volunteering in the gardens, I established connections with the farmers, who were willing to share their views. Aurovilians did not expect anything in return for the interviews. They were all very open and warm. Doing research in Auroville did not seem to influence the community. As Auroville hosts many visitors, including researchers, I could remain fairly anonymous. Participant observation was my main method, defined by DeWalt and DeWalt (2011:1) as “a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture.”

During my stay in Auroville, I interviewed inhabitants from twelve different (national) origins and with ages ranging between twenty and seventy, from pioneer to newcomer,<sup>3</sup> and with different jobs and interests. The interviews were semi-structured; following the flow of the conversation, I kept an eye on my topic list. My informants allowed me to record or take notes of the interviews. Nonetheless, I observed the ethical codes (following the AAA guide on ethics 2012) and explained clearly how the interview would be used and that I could anonymise all data. I obtained informed consent<sup>4</sup> for every interview. Moreover, before handing in my thesis, I gave my participants the opportunity to read it and respond to it.

Conducting interviews and informal conversations complemented and sharpened my observations. My senses played an important role in this research. Through the lens of sensory anthropology, I have been tasting, smelling, touching and observing the field. This is important, as Leavitt (1996:519) states: “using one's own body in fieldwork, instead of just a set of theoretical tools, yields knowledge that is otherwise unavailable.” Observation is a challenge, as Merleau-Ponty (1968:4) argues: “It is at the same time true that the world is what we see, and that nonetheless we must learn to see it”.

As an anthropologist, I am trained in studying humans. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that humans are part of nature and I plea for a more respectful, durable and sustainable way of treating our surrounding nature and its creatures. I am an environmental anthropologist studying anthropology of the body, thereby uncovering the human-nature relation and trying to demonstrate that we humans can take ecological responsibility. So I chose to research a topic that I am passionate about; as Nader (1972:303) points out: “While scientific findings may be ideally viewed as ‘value-free’, [...] the choice of subject for scientific inquiry is most certainly not”.

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<sup>3</sup> Pioneers are the Aurovilians who came in the beginning and devoted all their efforts to creating Auroville. Newcomers are people who want to become Aurovilian, but have been living there for less than a year and are therefore still in a process, or liminal phase.

<sup>4</sup> Informed consent can be defined as “the knowing consent of an individual, or a legally authorized representative able to exercise free power of choice without undue inducement or any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or other form of constraint or coercion” (Code of Federal Regulations 1991 in DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:215).

## **Structure**

The structure of this thesis is based on the three elements of embodiment of sustainability that I distinguish: community, nature, self.

In the first chapter I investigate the stimulating as well as challenging roles a community can play in sustainable behaviour. After sketching the background to Auroville, I report and analyse the different views held by its inhabitants on sustainability and the complex relation between spirituality and sustainability. The chapter concludes with a discussion of whether this intentional community can be regarded as an ecovillage.

The second chapter centres on the role of nature. First, the role of tree planting in Auroville is described as well as the effect that living and working in nature has on the lifestyle of its inhabitants. I conclude by analysing the attitudes of Aurovilians towards nature.

The third chapter is devoted to the self. I start by describing the disappointments concerning sustainability that inhabitants of Auroville are confronted with, but also pay attention to their sustainable lifestyles and initiatives. I conclude by analysing the agency of Aurovilians concerning sustainability.

The thesis ends with a conclusion, in which I sum up my findings, discuss my limitations, give suggestions for future research, and provide a short reflection. The bibliography can be found after this, followed by the appendices containing lists of interviewees and farms where I have worked.

## Maps



Figure 1: Location of Auroville in India

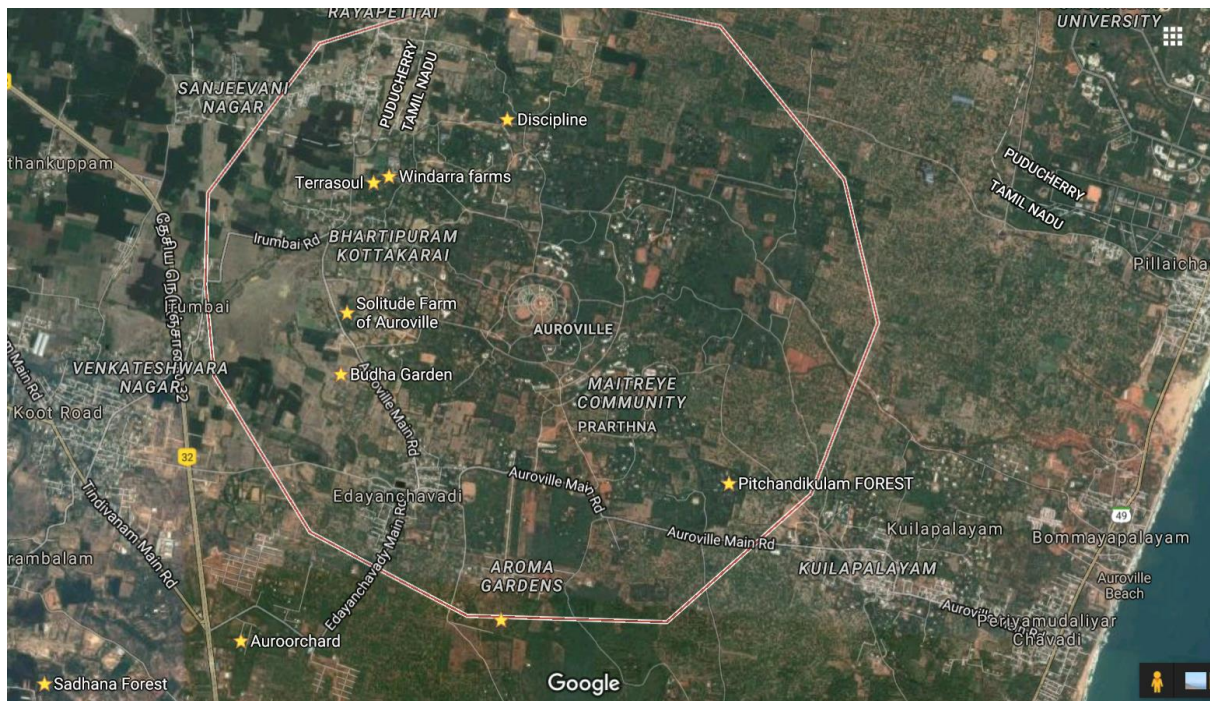


Figure 2: Satellite image of Auroville. The small circle in the middle is the garden around the spiritual centre 'Matrimandir'. The places where I volunteered are marked with a star. There are also shops, communities and communal buildings scattered around Auroville which are now invisible.

# 1. Community – challenges

*“Coming from an environmental science background, I was looking for scientific solutions to sustainable governance. But then I started teaching at an educational programme that was focused on integral sustainability, really holistic, looking at the individual's response and the community. It was an evolution for me in seeing that in many ways sustainability problems from a scientific perspective are very easy to solve. I realised that the social or individual responses to sustainability are a lot more challenging and more important.” ~ Neil<sup>5</sup>*

Embodiment of sustainability is constituted culturally, as our behaviour and beliefs are influenced by our social environment. Individuals become much more effective in their embodiment of sustainability if they mutually share and develop awareness and commitment, if they co-create and maintain a sustainable lifestyle. Fricker (2006:193) notes that the challenge of sustainability is mainly changing one's attitude and behaviour. “Sustainability must therefore include the social discourse where the fundamental issues are explored collaboratively within the groups or community concerned” (ibid).

In this chapter I first of all provide some insight into the historical, spiritual and demographic background of Auroville. Then I link my informants' varying views on sustainability to academic discussions, and go on to describe both the reinforcements and tensions between sustainability and spirituality. I conclude by discussing whether Auroville can be regarded as an ecovillage.

## 1.1 Auroville

*“For me the spiritual point of view is very important. I think without the input of the Mother or Sri Aurobindo, Auroville would not exist today. I had visits from European communities, and they all split, after a while they don't agree with each other. So there is a reason why Auroville still exists after nearly fifty years.” ~ Maggy<sup>6</sup>*

*“Auroville is a laboratory for people who wish to transform themselves. So that's why there are all different kinds of people. [...] It's not homogeneous, it's very diverse. That's why it's very difficult to speak about Auroville” ~ Francisco<sup>7</sup>*

Auroville is an experimental, which stems from the ideas of Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa – referred to as ‘The Mother’ by Aurovilians – and indirectly from the writings of her spiritual collaborator Sri

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<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s; farmer.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted on 22-03-2017 with Maggy, a French lady in her 50s who arrived in 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted on 28-03-2017 with Francisco, a French man in his 50s; living for two years on a farm.



Aurobindo. Alfassa said that Auroville would be the city the earth needs and an experiment in human unity. She had a vision that inspired and attracted many people. Auroville was first described publicly by Alfassa in 1965 as follows: “Auroville wants to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity” (OutreachMedia 2017:1). A year later the founding of Auroville was approved by the Government of India. On 28 February 1968, Auroville was ceremonially inaugurated and a four-point charter describing Auroville’s essence was issued, written by Alfassa (Auroville 2017<sup>8</sup>):

- 1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But, to live in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the divine consciousness.*
- 2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.*
- 3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.*
- 4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity.*

The charter is still referred to by many Aurovilians, both in their daily lives and at work. Although neither of them is alive today, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo are still important for Aurovilians. Many people I spoke with came to Auroville because they read about them. Her importance is evident as pictures of her are shown in many places; often it is a portrait in black and white in which Alfassa is looking at you.

Auroville is home to a wide variety of inhabitants, in terms of nationality as well as worldview and behaviour. As Francisco emphasises, there is not one story about Auroville. There are thousands of stories; everyone comes from a different background and culture, has a different lifestyle, and experiences Auroville in a different way. Just like the outside world, Auroville is a place with many different perspectives, my informants often pointed out.

Auroville was planned as a township for a population of 50,000 people from around the world. On 1 February 2017 it had 2703 inhabitants<sup>9</sup>, making it the largest intentional community. As several participants mention, you can still meet someone for the first time even after living here for a long time. Auroville consists of 2,012 adults (with a roughly equal male/female ratio) and 691 children. There are people from 53 nationalities, of which the biggest groups are 1,176 Indians, 382 French, 247

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.auroville.org/contents/1>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.auroville.org/contents/3329>

German, 152 Italian and 96 Dutch. English is the main language, but French and Tamil can also be heard often.

Auroville is literally an open community, as there is no fence around it. Visitors can stay in homestays and guesthouses. Becoming an Aurovilian is a bit more difficult: you need quite some savings to sustain yourself during the first year when you need to build a house, since you are not allowed to work but only to do voluntary work. For this reason there are relatively few young Aurovilians.

## 1.2 Views on Sustainable Development

*“Living sustainably obviously is a very rubbery term. It's very hard to define what it exactly means.” ~ Jasmin<sup>10</sup>*

The concept of sustainable development is important, since it shows a certain awareness and willingness to change. Nevertheless, it is rarely defined clearly (Fricker 2006:199, Adams 2006:4). Moreover, Fricker (2006:199) argues that instead of talking about sustainability we often define what is not sustainable: “Even though we cannot define sustainability objectively and unambiguously, we should not abandon or defer attempts to measure it.” Likewise, Viederman (1995 as reported by Fricker 2006:199) remarks that “sustainability is a vision of the future that provides us with a roadmap and helps us focus our attention on a set of values and ethical and moral principles by which to guide our actions.” In the same line, Mathilde<sup>11</sup> states that “it is an endless topic”, with which she means that you can always live more sustainably and that sometimes you have to make concessions as there is often not one most sustainable option but many suboptimal choices. There are further interesting parallels between the academic discussions and the responses of my informants.

### **Inclusive approach**

Sustainability has been defined as the ideal outcome of a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report in Adams 2006:2). By referring to “generations” the Report confines itself to human beings, while all living beings should be taken into account<sup>12</sup>. Besides that, the Report does not define what is meant by needs. Fricker (2006:192) stresses that our needs are very personal and situated, implying that the needs of future generations are undefined.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, a farmer in her 50s, living here for 8 years, but was involved already a long time before.

<sup>11</sup> Interview conducted on 14-04-2017 with Mathilde, a French lady in her 30s who arrived in 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Sadly, the Brundtland report takes an explicitly anthropocentric angle: “The loss of plant and animal species can greatly limit the options of future generations; so sustainable development requires the conservation of plant and animal species.” <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#> point 13

The principle for sustainable living “reflects the duty of care for other people and other forms of life, now and in the future. It is an ethical principle” (IUCN et al. 1991:9 in Argyrou 2005:49). Jurgen<sup>13</sup> also states that for him living sustainably is an ethical principle. Mathilde expresses an inclusive and holistic view on sustainability:

*“For me you have to be responsible for every act and decision, you have to think about the impact on the planet, other people, the animals. Being sustainable means taking only what you need and trying to take it in a way that does not hurt nature, animals or other human beings. And even bring something positive. [...] For me it's a global balance where you take and give according to what you need. Not think just here, now, myself.”*

### **Encompassing approach**

Sustainability is usually understood as pertaining to *people, planet and profit*. To clarify, in this thesis I focus on the environmental meaning of sustainability (rather than on social and economic sustainability). Most of my informants also focus on nature when defining sustainability, like Mathilde: *“A sustainable way of living is first of all not to damage the earth, and we damage it a lot. [...] Being on Mother Earth is a gift, we have to respect her.”* Francisco<sup>14</sup> also combines sustainability and nature when he emphasises the importance of living simply and in balance with nature. However, not all Aurovilians understand sustainability in purely environmental terms. Mathilde mentions that she also sees sustainability in terms of human relationships, and Kavitha<sup>15</sup> prefers a *“deeper definition of sustainability which is a bit more sacred”*. By this she means that you need to be integral, *“to create balance for myself, within myself and in my relationship to people”*. This includes respecting Mother Nature or the spirit of life. Thus, in Auroville sustainability mainly has a natural but also a social and a spiritual dimension.

### **Engaging approach**

Argyrou speaks of a ‘troubling paradox’ regarding sustainable behaviour: *“Although many people are aware of environmental problems and recognise their importance, then, most do not seem prepared to engage them seriously”* (2005:48). People are aware of the impact they have on nature, but still do not act responsibly. Lockyer and Veteto (2013:1) even emphasise that sustainability is a utopian concept: it is our aim but it is unreachable: *“Despite our best efforts, we do not know exactly what a sustainable society looks like.”* For many people this elusiveness leads to apathy. It is difficult for consumers to understand what sustainability entails as the term is used so frequently that it *“ends up meaning nothing”* (Adams 2006:3). As will become clear in this thesis, my informants are confronted

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<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted on 06-03-2017 with Jurgen, a German man in his 40s who lives here for seven years.

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted on 28-03-2017 with Fransisco, a French man in his 50s; living here for two years.

<sup>15</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3rd generation Aurovilian.

with disappointments and sometimes make suboptimal choices, but nevertheless commit to efforts to realise a more sustainable lifestyle.

### 1.3 Spirituality and sustainability

*“I don't know what's happening in Auroville but Mother kept saying: 'I am not defining a religion. I don't want to have religion in Auroville.' [...] But many have made a religion out of it. And as soon as you have a religious attitude, in my opinion you become rigid. You have a dogma, you have beliefs, and all this keeps you away from the direct experience. Because the direct experience is always surprising, you cannot control it. But we are a bit far away from sustainability.” ~ Christian<sup>16</sup>*

Many Aurovilians have a stronger focus on spirituality than on sustainability, as they seek to bring humanity to a higher consciousness. As Gijs<sup>17</sup> mentions: *“Human unity is an umbrella term; nature is a part of it”*. Varying interpretations of Alfassa's words cause tensions in the community, Tineke<sup>18</sup> explains. Some Aurovilians take everything literally; others, like Sonja, argue for more flexibility and try to interpret her words in view of today's world. During conversations, it became apparent that there are three points of tension that limit Aurovilians' ability or will to make sustainable decisions, namely the words of Alfassa on the Matrimandir, the masterplan and the vision of a township.

#### **Matrimandir**

The Matrimandir, a golden dome in the middle of Auroville, holds a special spiritual status, but Aurovilians differ in their views on it. Many enjoy it as a meditation centre, and it is also a main attraction for tourists. However, Tineke notes that this is a highly expensive building for which the gold was imported from Germany. Priya<sup>19</sup> is mainly annoyed by the amount of water that is used to irrigate the large lawn surrounding the Matrimandir: it should be used for food production instead. Some do not see this as a problem, but rather point to the water consumption of private lawns. Sonja<sup>20</sup> emphasises that she prefers to sit under the Banyan tree than in the Matrimandir. I personally found it ironic that the Matrimandir with its huge surrounding garden is called the 'park of unity' while it is surrounded by a fence, so that it loses its potential as a central meeting point and forms an impediment to an efficient infrastructure.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted on 27-03-2017 with Christian, a French man in his 50s who came in 2010, living on a farm.

<sup>17</sup> Conversation on 05-03-2017 with Gijs, a Dutch man in his 40s.

<sup>18</sup> Interview conducted on 15-02-2017 with Tineke, a Dutch lady in her 60s who arrived in 1980.

<sup>19</sup> Interview conducted on 18-03-2017 with Priya, a British lady in her 70s who lives on a farm.

<sup>20</sup> Interview conducted on 18-02-2017 with Sonja, a Dutch lady in her 60s.



*Matrimandir surrounded by a lawn, behind the fence.*

### **Masterplan**

The initial idea of how Auroville should be is often a source of tensions. The masterplan, designed by architect Roger Anger with the Mother's input, is followed in a literal way, as Sonja remarks. This plan calls for a lake near the Matrimandir. This has not yet been realised, partly because there are many counter voices saying that it is unsustainable and not appropriate in this climate. Others take a more spiritual stance when they argue that the masterplan should be completed. Christian explains that many Aurovilians feel that it is important to fulfil the masterplan, because then 'the thing' will happen; he himself is sceptical and does not believe this. According to Marti<sup>21</sup> their climate change awareness is insufficient: *"Our Master Plan does not take enough consideration of the vital importance of well-designated water catchment areas. We have to be more sustainable."* Tineke also expresses the need to be flexible; she stresses that Alfassa was flexible herself, that she regularly changed her opinion.

### **Township**

The building of roads also causes tensions due to different opinions. Marti explains that this is because roads may attract more traffic, create more pollution, will pass close by someone's house, but the biggest pain is the cutting of trees. This is a sensitive topic as Auroville started with the planting of trees. However, some may argue that in order to become a city with 50.000 inhabitants, in accordance with Alfassa's masterplan, a lot of houses and roads need to be built and trees will need to make place for this. As Neil<sup>22</sup> explains: *"there was one road that is being built but there is a special tree of particular*

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<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted on 23-02-2017 with Marti, an American lady who has lived here for 25 years.

<sup>22</sup> Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s; farmer.

ecological value, so the road went around the tree, it wasn't cut down. But that is a tension within the community; there are some whose primary focus is to build a physical city whereas others are here to build an ecological forest.” Kavitha<sup>23</sup>, however, offers a different perspective concerning the number of inhabitants:

*“The Mother said that the villagers are the first Aurovilians, which is also a huge question mark in many people's minds, because if the villagers are the first Aurovilians then maybe we are 50,000 people. Maybe we don't need to get more foreigners to join, we just need to help the people in the village to live how they would aspire to live. If we draw the line, we have I think about eleven villages right now touching the Auroville master plan.”*

The relationship between spirituality and sustainability in Auroville is complex: spirituality simultaneously furthers and impedes sustainable behaviour. An important reason for this is that Aurovilians focus on different aspects of the teachings of Alfassa, and some take her words literally while others are inspired by her flexibility. Therefore, the spiritual roots of this community not only provide common ground but also lead to heterogeneity in opinions and lifestyles. Besides this, individuality plays an important role in Auroville. Several informants explain that in Alfassa's view everyone is different and therefore should not be forced to behave in a certain way; people have different needs. Therefore, Auroville has only a few rules, which mainly concern administrative and financial agreements. Although this freedom is respected, some Aurovilians argue that there could be more restrictions. Jasmin suggests that Auroville should have certain basic policies and that it would be helpful if there was a manual for new Aurovilians helping them to make sustainable choices in their daily living.

Nature does play a role in the teachings of Alfassa and Aurobindo. Rod<sup>24</sup> and Jasmin<sup>25</sup> point out that the works of Sri Aurobindo are all about nature. I heard quite a few people referring to Alfassa's book about flowers, assigning a specific quality to each. Once, I attended a meeting on flowers and their special names. Ironically, all the flowers had been picked and obviously did not survive the meeting.

The point seems to be a lack of explicit references to sustainability in the teachings. Christian<sup>26</sup> notes: *“unfortunately the Mother never uttered a clear word regarding environment, ecology, things like that. So she let that space void, empty and everyone can fill it with what he feels. For some ecology, environment, sustainability doesn't even exist, it is out of their scope. So there are many different kinds of people in Auroville.”* Jasmin, however, stresses that Alfassa had an utmost respect and love for nature, and, as also noted by Sonja<sup>27</sup>, Alfassa very clearly opposed the use of pesticides in farming.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3rd generation Aurovilian.

<sup>24</sup> Interview conducted on 17-02-2017 with Rod, an American man in his 60s; philosopher.

<sup>25</sup> Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, a farmer in her 50s, living here for 8 years.

<sup>26</sup> Interview conducted on 27-03-2017 with Christian, a French man in his 50s who came in 2010; farmer.

<sup>27</sup> Interview conducted on 18-02-2017 with Sonja, a Dutch lady in her 60s.

Notwithstanding the lack of explicit references, some point to the ecological implications of the teachings, like Kavitha<sup>28</sup>:

*“Our charter and what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have talked about doesn't exactly spell out the word sustainability or green in any way. However, the fact that they encourage living and working integrally, it has to happen because if you work or do anything integrally then the environmental factor or your impact will always be taken into account.”* Christian also interprets Alfassa's words in a sustainable way: *“My compass is mainly what Mother said strongly, that Auroville must be the city the earth needs. I just look and maybe the city that the earth was needing in '68 is not the same thing that it's needing now.”*

## 1.4 Ecovillage

An ecovillage is a subcategory of an intentional community (Ergas 2010:34). Since it is a self-assigned term, it is difficult to determine whether a community actually is an ecovillage or merely an intentional community (Wagner 2012:82). More research is needed, as Lockyer and Veteto (2013:1) argue; as it is unknown what a sustainable society looks like, it could be termed a utopia<sup>29</sup>. Both Jackson (2004:26) and Greenberg (2013:270) note that, like the concept of sustainable development itself, ecovillages should be seen as a process, striving towards a goal but never reaching the ideal. One distinctive feature of ecovillages is their focus on sustainability.

Intentional communities date back to before the Roman Empire (Ergas 2010:34). They consist of a group of people who choose to live together and to pursue a certain lifestyle to reach a common goal or to solve a certain problem of the larger society (following Brown 2002:5, Andelson and Lockyer 2006:30, Kozeny 1995:18). The first ecovillages were established in the 1960's (Dawson 2013:222, Wight 2008:15). Before, communities experimented with ecological living in nature but they didn't focus on sustainability (Wagner 2012:82). In the 1990s these counterculture initiatives became a worldwide phenomenon, which “emerged to reformulate intentional community building based on more comprehensive ecotopian thinking” (Lockyer and Veteto 2013:16).

Some ecovillages emerged from what were intentional communities before (Wagner 2012:82, Lockyer and Veteto 2013:16); they can include more than a focus on ecology and this does not necessarily conflict with spirituality. Most ecovillages emerged out of dissatisfaction with historical processes of war, industrial acceleration, consumer lifestyle, capitalistic markets and politics, and seek to offer an alternative or antidote (Kasper 2008:21, Litfin 2009:132, LeVasseur 2013:253,255). Ecovillages have an experimental character, hold a holistic worldview regarding sustainability and have strong shared values (following Gilman 1991:10, Dawson 2013:219, Global Ecovillage Network). They

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<sup>28</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Aurovilian.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas More (1478-1535) saw a utopia as a place that only exists in the imagination.

shape “a new culture, designed to restore the Earth and her people” (Jackson and Svensson 2002:5) and to build relationships with all that surrounds them (Burke and Arjona 2013:235, cf. Litfin 2009:132).

The complex relation between spirituality and sustainability in Auroville, as demonstrated in the previous paragraph, raises the question whether it can be regarded as an ecovillage. After all, some of its inhabitants focus mainly on spirituality and deny the importance of a sustainable lifestyle. There is also no common agreement on the label. The lady who enrolled Auroville as a member of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) did so on her own initiative, in order to avoid endless discussions on the topic. There is nothing about being an ecovillage on the Auroville website; the GEN website<sup>30</sup> likewise offers no information on what makes Auroville an ecovillage or what role sustainability plays in this community.

On the one hand, it is clear that sustainability motives play an important role in people’s choice for Auroville. As expressed by Anandi<sup>31</sup>:

*“Auroville is a spiritual but also an alternative society. The society outside was not what we were looking for in our lives, the manifestation of the world outside was terrible for us. It didn’t correspond to anything we aspired for in terms of relations among people and relations with the planet. Also, what is the role of a human being? If it is as a machine that makes money and then spends it, for us that was not our role in life.”*

On the other hand, several inhabitants reject the label. Kavitha<sup>32</sup>, who works at GEN Auroville, explains:

*“People don’t like the word ‘ecovillage’ because it says we’re a village and the Mother said we’re a township. And they don’t like the word ‘eco’ because it does not include spirituality, they are very critical about it. They say: ‘we’re not just an ecovillage, we’re so much more!’ I don’t really have a problem with the word. I think maybe at the moment we are an ecovillage because we’re still so small and our strength is being green. But it’s just a label, it doesn’t matter.”*

Neil remarks that it is not the main goal of Auroville to be sustainable; likewise, Jurgen stresses that spirituality is the main focus. Several people deny that Auroville is an ecovillage, because a lot still needs to improve. Neil and Sonja state that Auroville is becoming a sustainable city, but Jurgen and Rod disagree.

Dawson (2013:223) notices a development where ecovillages transform ‘from island to network’: instead of closed communities they now appear to be interacting with their surroundings, making their effect more widespread. This is also visible in Auroville. Auroville positively influences its

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<sup>30</sup> <https://ecovillage.org/project/auroville/>

<sup>31</sup> Interview conducted on 13-04-2017 with Anandi, a Spanish lady in her 40s working at PTDC.

<sup>32</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a 3rd generation Aurovilian.



surrounding villages as well as India as a whole. Neil<sup>33</sup> describes the role of the botanical garden, who are *“actively involved in the ecological restoration in the bioregion. They provide around 50,000 seedlings of the local forest to ecological restoration projects within Auroville and the bioregion. The ecological structure is now robust enough and sustainable in itself, that it can regenerate.”* He explains that Auroville is also successful in working with women's groups and local medicine; they create situations where the women get an income from the plants and at the same time protect the forest. Rod explains that Auroville successfully invests in education in the villages. Furthermore, Sonja points out that Auroville started the reforestation effort before India did; when the government saw the results, they started to support.

In my opinion Auroville is an intentional community with a hybrid character. Its roots are spiritual, and these inspire its inhabitants in different ways and degrees to live a more or less sustainable life. The individuality of the inhabitants is reflected in their disagreement about whether Auroville is an ecovillage or not. In the next chapters, I will primarily focus on the sustainable aspects of Aurovilian life; most of my informants have a holistic and integral view on sustainability.

## 1.5 Conclusion

Auroville is an intentional community, but opinions on whether it is an ecovillage vary: some inhabitants reject the label, others argue that Auroville it is partly an ecovillage or becoming one. The individuality and diversity of the inhabitants is reflected in this disagreement. The community's relationship with sustainability is complicated by its spiritual roots. Spirituality provides not only common ground for Aurovilians but also leads to heterogeneity in opinions and lifestyles, also concerning sustainability. Aurovilians focus on different aspects of the teachings of Alfassa, this can be a source of inspiration to develop a more sustainable lifestyle, but can also lead to the denial of the importance and urgency of ecological challenges. This complicates the drawing of conclusions, as it is difficult to say something about the average Aurovilian. In my informants' views on sustainability I recognise three approaches towards sustainability: inclusive (all species, now and in the future), all-encompassing (natural, social and spiritual dimensions) and engaging (putting effort into realising a sustainable lifestyle and stimulating others). Auroville shows a great diversity in lifestyle and attitudes concerning sustainability. They do have a positive influence on the region as well as on other places in India, in terms of a more sustainable way of living.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s; farmer.

## 2. Nature – lifestyle and attitudes

Not only the social but also the natural environment influences the embodiment of sustainability. This embodiment encompasses connectedness to nature. I start this chapter by describing the role of nature in Auroville, deeply rooted in the reforestation effort as the beginning of this intentional community. The second paragraph shows how Aurovilians experience nature and how that affects their embodiment of sustainability and lifestyle. Finally, different attitudes towards nature are discerned as elements of the embodiment of sustainability.

### 2.1 The role of nature in the culture of Auroville: tree planting

*“This planting of trees, making a place green and making it beautiful and having no money at all and sharing everything, was very much part of Auroville. In that way, it has changed a lot. And of course, Auroville is still riding on the work that all those pioneers did and still do. People in the green belt, in the farms and the forests still work the land. Although this is really appreciated, it's almost taken for granted by many people, especially if they come now. ‘Oh, it's beautiful, it's green,’ but you know that every tree needed attention, water, care and protection.” ~ Lisbeth<sup>34</sup>*

A central part of the culture of Auroville is taking care of nature. Nature has been important to the community from the very start. Lisbeth, quoted above, clarifies that the first thing they did when arriving in Auroville in the 60s was to create shade by planting trees, in order to create a liveable place. At that time Auroville was a desert, with dry red earth under a burning sun where nothing grew. When the monsoon came, the topsoil would wash away into the sea. Sonja<sup>35</sup> explains that the land has a history of logging and exhaustive harvesting; what was once a rich tropical forest had become exhausted land. Marti<sup>36</sup> explains that they first introduced exotic trees that were able to survive in such a dry place. These trees would prepare the soil, after which native trees were reintroduced. She remarks: “Today we have more knowledge and pioneer the land almost solely with indigenous species.” However, Kavitha<sup>37</sup> points out that it is not done enough: “*We actually have to plant the second generation of indigenous forest now and this is not really in the awareness of young people. If you look at residential areas, we're actually planting a lot of exotic species, which are not the best for our climate and very water consuming.*” She also emphasises that the pioneers created the groundwork

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<sup>34</sup> Interview conducted on 04-05-2017 with Lisbeth, a Dutch lady in her 70s who arrived in 1970.

<sup>35</sup> Interview conducted on 18-02-2017 with Sonja, a Dutch lady in her 60s.

<sup>36</sup> Interview conducted on 23-02-2017 with Marti, an American lady who has lived here for 25 years.

<sup>37</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3rd generation Aurovillian.

through reforestation and by reviving indigenous species, and that this is something Aurovilians can be proud of: *“I have a huge amount of respect for my parents and grandparents and the amount of work they did. I've heard how difficult it was. I haven't reforested much, because it's been done for us, but that's their legacy. We're going to maintain it.”* Kavitha feels that it is their duty to protect the birds and snakes that have come back, because: *“it's part of the Auroville culture now. People are quite defensive about the trees. There's a culture of forestry here that's quite strong. You can see us building the roads around trees so that we don't have to take them down.”* Although some new Aurovilians take the green in the area for granted, the history of reforestation is well known by most inhabitants, it is a collective memory cherished with a certain pride.

According to Milton (1993) environmentalists are convinced that humans hold certain – culturally specific – responsibilities in relation to nature, without which a ‘viable’ future is impossible. The Aurovilians I spoke with can be described as environmentalists. They take care of nature and take responsibility for their natural environment, through reforestation and conservation efforts. Their afforestation project is very successful; since 1968 about three million trees have been planted.<sup>38</sup> The Forest Group brings together Auroville’s green workers, who focus on “planting and maintaining Auroville’s forested areas, restoring and upholding biodiversity, conserving soil and water, and taking a lead in environmental education and innovation.”<sup>39</sup> Planting trees is still important in Auroville, as there is still some bare land. Sadhana Forest – located outside Auroville, but officially part of it – is fully focussed on reforestation. According to Sonja<sup>40</sup>, there you can see how Auroville started. Sadhana Forest is a community of volunteers from all over the world. It is one of the most popular sites of Auroville, visited by many tourists as well.



*Street view in Auroville, with many trees*

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.green.aurovilleportal.org/units/55-forest-g-units/186-auroville-forest-group>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.auroville.org/contents/2896>

<sup>40</sup> Interview conducted on 18-02-2017 with Sonja, a Dutch lady in her 60s.

## 2.2 The experience of nature: change of lifestyle

*“I was travelling in India. Auroville was the cleanest place I had seen. It just felt like: wow. It was like a cocoon of peace. I could hear the birds finally, and trees and flowers, and this was a very big thing after all the travelling and, yeah, I just felt so good here.” ~ Helena<sup>41</sup>*

The senses are crucial for our bodily experiences and our perception of the world. “[T]he senses, emotions, and affect are the essence of our embodied materialities and socialities” (Mascia-Lees 2011:2). However, even though we perceive with our whole body, in ‘the West’ sight clearly dominates (Ingold 2011:45). In Auroville, however, all the senses are revived and a certain body awareness evolves. It is a place where people connect with nature, and where this experience is valued. Aurovilians mention that they perceive a bodily change through this relation with nature.

While living in Auroville, I personally experienced a bodily change and a deeper experience of nature. For the first time in my life I was able to wake up at five in the morning, just before sunrise, when the birds started singing. I felt energetic living by daylight. I did not feel the urge to use my electronic devices. I really felt like I was living in nature, especially when I stayed in a keet hut, which is quite open, also to all kinds of insects. I learned a lot about nature’s processes. The moon was always visible. When it was full it would brighten the night, whereas nights with a new moon were very dark. When it rained, I knew the soil and plants needed it, and I greeted it with joy rather than with concern for the negative consequences for my mobility. Helena experiences a similar joy with rain and also a change due to living in nature:

*“The more you live in nature, the more you follow the cycle of nature. You go to sleep early and wake up early, and you have a tendency to eat healthily. You want to do stuff like yoga, you take time for it and then this whole thing felt so healthy, so good. [...] When you live in nature, you can still have your phone glued to your face but it's not likely that you'll do that. You connect much more to your environment.”*

Krupa<sup>42</sup> similarly explains how she started to live by the daylight. Isabelle<sup>43</sup> describes another form of bodily change: *“I changed how I walk; to not step on things. I am more aware of life around me. I am woken up by the birds. Also, I have more connection with myself.”*

A close connection with one’s own body is common in Auroville. Kavitha<sup>44</sup> for example mentions that many people feel it in their body when it is full moon: *“Then, everyone is emotionally a*

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<sup>41</sup> Interview conducted on 10-03-2017 with Helena, a French lady in her 30s; newcomer and yoga teacher.

<sup>42</sup> Interview conducted on 02-05-2017 with Krupa, a young Indian lady from the USA.

<sup>43</sup> Interview conducted on 04-05-2017 with Isabelle, a French lady in her 30s.

<sup>44</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3rd generation Aurovilian.

*bit more aware of what's going on.*" These experiences are likely to change one's lifestyle, as Anandi<sup>45</sup> mentions:

*"I changed being in Auroville. The fact of being in contact with nature and that you are the whole year with your feet in the free air and wear very little clothes, is fantastic for your body. That you don't need to live in spaces with a heating system where you breathe in suffocating air or that cloths pressurize you. Also to see the sky and the sun every day, it changed me and my character completely. To be in contact with so many animals is also something that makes you much more aware."*

The change of lifestyle by living in Auroville is reinforced by working in nature, especially farming and foresting. Auroville has around twenty farms<sup>46</sup>, varying in their methods and production, though all use (principles of) organic and permaculture methods. There are dairy farms, vegetable gardens and fruit orchards. Agriculture plays a prominent role in Auroville: many inhabitants learn to garden and many prefer to eat the vegetables from local farms. Although Auroville's aim is to be fully self-sufficient, still a lot of food is imported. Inhabitants know the farms, the farmers and how they grow food. In this way, Aurovilians develop a closer relation to the food they eat, and they know the importance of consuming local food.

Especially at permaculture farms, people have a very respectful relation to nature and all that lives in it. Christian<sup>47</sup>, on whose organic farm I worked, explains that permaculture is a method by which you permanently have something growing on the land, and that it is the art of doing as little as possible. Crops are mixed, and if weeds do not take nutrients away from the crop, then they are not removed. *"Important is to just grow things, we also grow non-crops, because it brings fertility. Now the fruits are sleeping, they live well together and are enriching the soil."* Christian stresses that observation is important: *"Gardening is a story: you see the effect, the whole and the changes."* It is an act in which the body and nature meet and touch, as an interaction. I volunteered regularly in different gardens, and working with my hands in the soil stimulated my senses. It is an experience of observation, smell, touch and tasting. This experience creates a strong caring bond between the body and nature.

Aviram, who started Sadhana Forest with his wife, also explains that observing nature is very important. He said that you should live on a land for at least a year in order to understand which processes are going on, to know where you can build and plant. He used to sit down and observe. In this way he learned a lot about his surroundings. The reforestation project of Sadhana Forest includes a lot of care for every individual tree. And as it is a vegan community, they also have much respect for animals. This respect is conveyed to all volunteers who come to the community.

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<sup>45</sup> Interview conducted on 13-04-2017 with Anandi, a Spanish lady in her 40s working at PTDC.

<sup>46</sup> The farms where I have worked are described in the appendix

<sup>47</sup> Interview conducted on 27-03-2017 with Christian.

Krupa emphasises that growing her own vegetables feels empowering and that she values her relation with the earth. Similarly, Helena<sup>48</sup> describes her experience with farming:

*“When you go back to nature you realise that most of the things just don't make sense, you understand that you are in nature and you try to tune in with the environment. And gardening definitely does this: putting your hands in the earth, to see the plants growing, to eat the food that you're growing is just such an amazing feeling. And I think for everybody it's such a strong feeling. It's fulfilling when you eat it; it brings a lot of joy.”*

The awareness of being surrounded by nature stimulates many Aurovilians to a more sustainable behaviour. One of my informants explains: *“By being in connection with nature, your lifestyle automatically changes. You will use less water, not waste it. In fact, I do not think much about it; it goes naturally. I know that plants do not like soap, so I use probiotic soap.”*

Nature plays an important role in Auroville; the inhabitants appreciate it. As Lisbeth<sup>49</sup> puts it: *“Nature has always been important for me. I feel well around soil. I can't live in a street. It is a world of difference.”* Living and working in Auroville leads to a change in lifestyle, especially for inhabitants who previously lived in urban environments. This new lifestyle, embodying sustainability, is based on a cluster of attitudes towards nature.

## 2.3 Attitudes towards nature

As the previous paragraph illustrated, switching from ordinary western civilisation to living and working in Auroville is accompanied by a change in lifestyle, which can be characterised as less alienated from nature. Based on the interviews with my informants, three different but interconnected attitudes towards nature can be discerned in the Aurovilian lifestyle, which I have labelled as natural, ethical, and spiritual. Each attitude is expressed in two different modes.

### **A natural attitude: entanglement**

As we have seen in the *Introduction*, environmental issues can be related to the alienation of western humans from nature. A more natural (in the sense of a non-alienated) attitude towards nature appears to be an essential aspect of a sustainable lifestyle. The core of this natural attitude is understanding that we humans are part of nature. Both Rod<sup>50</sup> and Jasmin express that we are part of nature. Jasmin<sup>51</sup> explains it as being affected: *“At every minute, at every second we are affected. Anything from the weather to the water we drink to the earth we touch and walk on, especially when you walk barefoot.”*

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<sup>48</sup> Interview conducted on 10-03-2017 with Helena, a French lady in her 30s who is in the newcomer process.

<sup>49</sup> Interview conducted on 04-05-2017 with Lisbeth, a Dutch lady in her 70s who arrived in 1970.

<sup>50</sup> Interview conducted on 17-02-2017 with Rod, an American man in his 60s

<sup>51</sup> Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, living in Auroville for 8 years, situated on a farm.

*We are also affected negatively by pollution, when you almost can't breathe because people are burning rubbish somewhere.*" Another mode is experiencing being connected, as Neil<sup>52</sup> explains: *"As a plant chemist, I only knew the inside of the plant, but not how to grow it. I was distanced and not embodied, I did not have the human-nature connection I had as a kid. It is a personal journey to reconnect with nature."* Both Neil and Lucas<sup>53</sup> express that they are at ease in nature. Jasmin and Isabelle stress the importance of connecting with nature, it concerns them to see the disconnectedness that many people have with nature.

What I have labelled as a natural attitude is also present in literature. In order to achieve change in how we treat nature, environmentalists propose a mindset that sees humans as part of nature. According to Foss (2009:9), it is important to realise that human life is made possible only because of nature, and that 'environmental' issues can only be solved once we acknowledge the relationship between human nature and nature at large. Barad (2003:828) argues that we are interacting with the world: *"'We' are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity."*<sup>54</sup> Tsing (2012:144) stresses that: *"Human nature is an interspecies relationship."* Ingold (2011:70) holds a similar view, noting that we are living in a meshwork, which is a *"relational field [...] of interwoven lines"*. All lives are entangled; therefore he suggests that we should not speak of 'environment' – which is the one-sided perspective of what *"surrounds the organism"* – but instead of 'entanglement'.

### **An ethical attitude: responsibility**

The natural attitude acknowledges that humans are interwoven with nature. The ethical attitude adds to this understanding the experience of the value of nature and a sense of human responsibility and obligation. According to Naess (as recorded by Argyrou 2005:53) *"all beings, whether living or non-living in the strict biological sense, have intrinsic value [...] independent of human evolution. [Therefore] all beings are morally considerable and deserve respect for what they are."* This ethical attitude towards nature is also present in the remarks of my informants.

A more passive (in the sense of non-interfering) mode of this ethical attitude is respecting nature as it is. Kavitha<sup>55</sup> expresses this attitude explicitly: *"In every relationship with another living being – plant, animal, the earth, growing food – you bring balance and integrity into it and then you're respecting that life force."* The same passive ethical attitude is tacitly present in responses by other

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<sup>52</sup> Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s; farmer.

<sup>53</sup> Interview conducted on 03-05-2017 with Lucas, a German man in his 60s, working at EcoPro.

<sup>54</sup> Intra-action is used *"in contrast to the usual "interaction," which presumes the prior existence of independent entities"*; it refers to a dynamics of mutual constitution (Barad 2003:815).

<sup>55</sup> Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3rd generation Aurovilian.

informants, for instance Marti:<sup>56</sup> *"I don't break a branch just because it is in the way."* Jasmin<sup>57</sup> demonstrates a similar attitude: *"And often to see, even in farming, how we deal with Mother Nature, how we're cutting it, how we deal with animals, it's often quite hard to take for me."*

A more active ethical mode is taking care of nature. In the words of Anandi<sup>58</sup>: *"The relation with the planet, the earth was very different [from Spain] because we realised how important it is to take care of it. Auroville is a place that needs to be cared for, all these trees that have been planted for so many years had to be really loved and cared for."* Nature in itself has to be respected, but what has become of nature by human intervention has to be taken care of.

Of course, the natural and the ethical attitude towards nature are interwoven, as for instance Isabelle<sup>59</sup> expresses: *"My house is open, I feel part of the system, for my kids this is normal. In the West people see enemies everywhere, but we are part of the ecosystem."* Understanding being a part of nature is accompanied by an open and appreciative attitude towards it.

### **A spiritual attitude: worshipping**

Besides a natural and an ethical attitude, the responses of my informants also reveal a spiritual attitude towards nature. The basis for this worship is a spiritual experience of nature. Jasmin<sup>60</sup> illustrates this experience: *"I'm aware that Mother Nature is a totally conscious being. She's really our mother. And there is sacredness that comes with it."* This spiritual experience of nature as a conscious and a sacred entity leads to a spiritual attitude, in which again a more passive and a more active mode can be distinguished. The more passive (in the sense of non-interfering) mode is that of honouring. Jasmin demonstrates this mode: *"I am thirsting to honour Mother Nature as completely as possible."* Also another gardener expresses: *"Nature gives us a lot of gifts, we are honouring all gifts of Mother Earth."* A more active mode is praying, as Jasmin expresses: *"Often I feel like nature has been so disturbed that I just pray for healing"*. Here we see a parallel with the ethical attitude: nature in itself has to be honoured, but what has become of nature by human intervention is subject to prayers.

An intriguing aspect of the spiritual attitude is communication. On a Thursday morning at the Botanical gardens, we are sitting in a circle filling small plastic bags with earth from the pile in the middle. Three of us are newcomers, doing their voluntary service, and three are living in Auroville for some years, all of them past their sixties. Suddenly a Frenchman stops working for some minutes and says: *"One day I was killing a rat. At some point I thought: Why am I doing this? My house is open, I*

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<sup>56</sup> Interview conducted on 23-02-2017 with Marti, an American lady who has lived here for 25 years.

<sup>57</sup> Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, a farmer in her 50s, living here for 8 years, but already involved for several decades.

<sup>58</sup> Interview conducted on 13-04-2017 with Anandi, a Spanish lady in her 40s working at PTDC.

<sup>59</sup> Interview conducted on 04-05-2017 with Isabelle, a French lady in her 30s.

<sup>60</sup> Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, she is a farmer in her 50s, living here for 8 years, but was involved already a long time before.



*have no walls and I leave food on the table. Of course animals would come in.” A lady responds: “I know people who feed the rats at their home. They point to food they are allowed to eat and other food that they should not eat. And you know, they listen! It seems to work if you talk with them.”* Jasmin mentions another form of communication between humans and nature, not humans speaking to creatures, but nature speaking to humans: *“I’ve always felt that the earth in Auroville is very conscious. I don’t know how to explain this but there is a very conscious energy here in nature. And often I feel that nature communicates with us. Nature speaks to us.”*

In the view of radical environmentalists or deep ecologists, like Naess, when people are able to identify with nature and other beings, caring for these others will follow naturally (in Argyrou 2005:54). “Most people cannot identify with a flea because they are trapped into [...] an egotistical self” (ibid:55). Things would change if everybody would see that everything has the same origin, or as the “product of a cosmic ‘dance’ ” (following Spretnak by Argyrou 2005:139). This view can be linked to the view of all being one: “Life is fundamentally One, and because it is one and the same, one should experience oneself to be a genuine part of all life” (Argyrou 2005:55). As Jackson (1983) states: “To recognise the embodied-ness of our Being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one.” The responses of my informants show traces of such an identification, like the experience of being part of and connected with nature. More important, however, is that they express a reverential distance towards nature on the one hand and at the same time an almost familial closeness.

## 2.4 Conclusion

An important aspect of the embodiment of sustainability is the relation of human beings to their natural environment, as we saw in the *Introduction*. The importance of the relation to the natural environment is firmly rooted in the culture of Auroville, since this intentional community started with the reforestation of wasteland, a tradition that is still shared and pursued. The awareness of the body of the inhabitants is stimulated by leaving their ordinary western lifestyle behind and starting to live and work in Auroville. The embodiment of sustainability regarding nature by Aurovilians is based on an individual mixture of collective attitudes, which encompass and combine natural entanglement, ethical responsibility and spiritual worshipping. Aurovilians feel affected by and connected with nature. They respect and honour nature, they take care of it, pray for it and even communicate with it. In this they embody – although not in a perfect way – an inclusive approach to sustainability: they don’t just care about their own needs as human beings but assume responsibility for their natural environment. My informants focus on the ecological impact for all species, now as well as in the future, and they have a sustainable stance towards nature, which is neither perceived as threatening nor used in an exploitative way.

### 3. Self – agency

*“I think people are more aware here of the global balance of life, and that sports and taking good care of your body is also part of the global balance. [...] Many people go around by bicycle because it's good for the body and the planet. It's easy because distances are not big inside Auroville. [...] Here people have a more holistic view of life. For me it's obvious that our environment and what we do, what we eat, the people we meet – all that influences how we feel and who we are.” ~ Mathilde<sup>61</sup>*

Mathilde, a young French lady who is in the newcomer process, illustrates in the quote above the core of this chapter: the furthering of sustainability through the effect of one's choices and behaviour on one's surroundings and on oneself. I got to know her through her workshop on natural cosmetics, which is for her a way to take care of both of her body and her environment. 'Awareness' is important for Aurovilians, and as I show in this chapter, it is present in Auroville. As Lucas<sup>62</sup> marks: *“Here in India the problems are in your face. We have above average awareness, but we are not closer to solutions”*.

As I showed in the previous chapters, embeddedness in an intentional community and connectedness to nature are conducive to develop a strong embodiment of sustainability. However, the most crucial aspect is an active personal engagement to feel responsible for and take care of nature. In order to be effective, this engagement has to be permanent and progressive. Embodiment of sustainability requires self-will and agency, as a basis for dialogue and interaction between self and context. Agency can be described as the power of an individual to act and make independent choices. A certain responsibility comes with this free-will, as although it implies an individuality, still one lives in a society with which one interacts. Agency, therefore, is often brought into relation with structure, which are the social boundaries that limit or condition individual behaviour (Strauss 2007, Rapport and Overing 2000).

In this chapter I analyse the behaviour of Aurovilians on the topic of sustainable choices and initiatives. First I outline some disappointments of the inhabitants regarding the level of sustainability of their community. Then I describe some aspects of their sustainable lifestyle choices as well as their initiatives to create a more sustainable community. I conclude by examining the agency of Aurovilians regarding sustainability.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview conducted on 14-04-2017 with Mathilde, a French lady in her 30s who arrived in 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Interview conducted on 03-05-2017 with Lucas, a German man in his 60s, working at EcoPro.

## 3.1 Disappointments

*“I think when one knows the ideal of Auroville and one flames for that ideal, then sometimes it can come as a sobering shock to see that Auroville seems to be quite far behind. Especially socially, but also in terms of sustainability. Things could be different if you really want Auroville to be the city the earth needs and to set an example. Of course, it's easy to fall into criticising. Despite so many amazing individuals with amazing aspirations, collectively we are until now not getting our act together. It seems all these individual efforts are like seeds falling on poor soil. What is it that should change, that can change?” ~ Jasmin<sup>63</sup>*

Jasmin perfectly sums up the core of this paragraph: there are sustainable efforts but sustainability is not as present in Auroville as one might wish. Inhabitants do inspire each other on an individual level regarding sustainability but it is not actively encouraged by the community as a whole. Coming to Auroville, I had expected to arrive in a green alternative community, a place where sustainability is tangible. I held tacit expectations based on the fact that it is called an ecovillage and based on stories on the internet claiming that Aurovilians live in human unity and without money. I expected a strong sense of community, but instead people live their lives quite individually. Helena<sup>64</sup> seems to have a similar experience:

*“I didn't see Auroville as the place I would want to settle but I felt there was something to do, maybe I could give it a try. [...] I went through many ups and downs, as many people when we arrive here; most of us have a lot of expectations. Sometimes we're a little disappointed with the reality, also with ecology. And when you see all the garbage we create here and everybody going around more and more in cars and all those things, it didn't really suit the ideas I had for this place.”*

Helena's disappointments also concern the food system:

*“We used to be self-sustaining in food but actually I think 90% of our food comes from the outside. The problem is many people don't want to do farming, but if we don't produce our own food then how can we expect to get some organic food? [...] I guess we have to bring more consciousness, and I feel sometimes people are very stressed here, which I don't find normal. They're running around from morning to night but I think we are here to have some time to take care of a garden and of ourselves, and to contribute to our community. I don't really see the point of having a 45-hours-a-week job here. We just reproduce whatever we left back home.”*

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<sup>63</sup> Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, she is a farmer in her 50s, living here for 8 years.

<sup>64</sup> Interview conducted on 10-03-2017 with Helena, a French lady in her 30s; newcomer and yoga teacher.

This last sentence is especially important since many people come to Auroville because it promises to be different. When Auroville appears to be the same as the outside world, this can be confusing or frustrating. Helena does not understand the choices made by other inhabitants: *“Many people smoke, drink alcohol and eat meat. This was a big surprise and disappointment for me.”* Jasmin experiences a similar disappointment, comparing Auroville to the outside world:

*“At the level of policy making, I think we should be much more focusing on sustainability. [...] Some people seem [...] [to have] a different mind-set. There seems to be a similar divide in Auroville like outside, where you have the conventional people and the greens. The greens are looked at as hippy-type idealists, dreamers, unrealistic and definitely not taken very seriously. Certainly we're more conscious than the average person out there on the whole, but these dynamics are present in Auroville.”*

Jasmin is part of the Green Centre, which she describes as the “little green voice” in Auroville. She writes columns about sustainability in the News & Notes, but wonders if it really has an impact: *“Why is it that we still use flush toilets in new buildings? Nowadays dry toilets or bio-digester toilets are so advanced technologically. [...] The same with being on-grid or using petrol. I mean here I'm really missing a little bit of collective will.”* I can only agree with her, as I personally missed this spirit as well. Similarly, Neil<sup>65</sup> refers to Auroville as a whole: *“We could be better after 50 years. We still water plants that should not grow in this climate. There is no unit who says that you are right or wrong.”* He talks about a shared responsibility but at the same time he implies the need for a regulating organ to stimulate sustainable behaviour. Sonja<sup>66</sup> fears that if Auroville does not adjust to nature, it could be the destruction of Auroville.

My informants describe themselves as being more sustainability minded than the average Aurovilian, who enjoy the freedom and the diversity of the community, which sometimes conflicts with sustainable values as discussed in Chapter 1.

## 3.2 Sustainable Lifestyle

Notwithstanding the disappointments my informants experience they continue with their effort to develop a more sustainable lifestyle. The following topics seem to be most important with regard to personal choices: preventing and recycling waste, toilet paper and compost toilets, water use and bicycles. In all this, consciousness plays an important role.

### Consciousness

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<sup>65</sup> Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s; farmer.

<sup>66</sup> Interview conducted on 18-02-2017 with Sonja, a Dutch lady in her 60s.

As everywhere, inhabitants of Auroville struggle to change their habits concerning the tempting goods offered on the consumer market. Sometimes people get stuck into unsustainable habits formed by their culture and current context. Nevertheless, some people do their best, as Jasmin mentions:

*“Since I was small I tried not to pollute, I tried to act sustainably. Just in my small ways, to use eco-friendly products, not to pollute by travelling unnecessarily, to be economical with using resources and to recycle. [...] But at the end of the day, what is the net balance of all of this? It's hard to say. So, am I a sustainable person? I try to do what I can to live modestly.”*

Sustainable behaviour requires a certain consciousness, which is stimulated in Auroville, according to my informants. Mathilde's consciousness, for instance, was enhanced:

*“because here it's everywhere and everybody is really conscious of the importance of what you eat and drink, how people are treated, where your clothes come from. [...] Sustainability is almost an endless topic. Because our world is so full of chemicals and shit, and to go back to basics is actually very rebellious and revolutionary. I feel way better to live in Auroville where people are more conscious.”*

Helena<sup>67</sup> affirms this, also relating sustainability to consciousness and her body:

*“The thing about Auroville is that I've had more time to take care of my body, it was the idea to take care of myself when I left. Auroville invites you to do this. I would say not only in the body but in everything is more consciousness; being aware of the things, how we do them. You did things automatically before and now you think: okay, if I do this, this would be the consequence, am I comfortable with this or not? If not, I'll find another way to do it.”*

## **Toilets**

Changing one's lifestyle can be quite challenging. The first day in Auroville I thought I was unlucky not to find any toilet with toilet paper. Soon I realised that people use their hands to wash themselves after using the toilet. To some this may seem natural and hygienic, but not to me at the time. I was aware of the cultural barrier I needed to set aside, because I did not want to be like 'those tourists' who always carry toilet paper with them. So, one day I tried it. The technique, especially with a bucket of water (in toilets lacking a hand shower), was quite hard. Furthermore, you are supposed to wash yourself with your left hand since you eat your meals with your right hand, but being left-handed I would have preferred to do it the other way around. I learned to use my body in a new way, which was very surprising. After some time it became normal for me, mainly because everybody does it. I myself made a step towards a stronger embodiment of sustainability, mainly by not using toilet paper. This is the case for most Aurovilians, who are confronted with the habit but soon get used to it. It is conventional in Auroville therefor most people do not talk about it, when asking about it, people remark that now

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<sup>67</sup> Interview conducted on 10-03-2017 with Helena, a French lady in her 30s; newcomer and yoga teacher.

they see toilet paper as being unclean. Toilet paper is often bleached, full of chemicals and creates a lot of waste, as Anandi<sup>68</sup> explains.

Toilets appear to be a topic many Aurovilians talk about. Dry toilets are more sustainable, as they create fertile soil and save water (and no need for wastewater treatment plants). *“Nature organises itself in circles”*, Christian explains, *“taking vegetables and fruits from the soil, eating, shitting, recycling the shit into the soil and growing again is very important”*. At farms, compost toilets are often used to return the fertile nutrients to the ground. Christian emphasises that when people use flush toilets, the fertility cycle is broken:

*“Half of humanity is shitting in pipes! Whatever the fertility of the planet, 98% of this shit is lost, is buried in landfills or burnt because we cannot do anything else with it. It's poisonous. When you flush your toilet, you just say that your outcome, your shit, is nothing, is just a waste which has to be disposed, so you break a cycle. The first thing I did when I came into the farm was to ban the flush toilets. I wanted symbolically that the human cycle on the farm would become closed and fertile, sustainable. My work in farming is to build a piece of art with these cycles.”*

Also outside farms some people have compost toilets. Mathilde explains that the new sustainable community they are starting will have dry toilets, as this reduces water consumption by forty percent. *“When you come here, and you see that we have water shortage, that there are people who don't even have drinking water, and then you would wash your pee and poo with drinking water. That's totally nonsense.”*

## **Bicycles**

Remarkably, in Auroville you mainly see motorbikes and mopeds on the roads. Even though there are bicycle paths, these are not used often. Throughout my stay I used a bicycle, and I could not figure out why others did not. Most Aurovilians explain that it is too hot or that they are too busy. Most of my informants, however, cycled often or at least sometimes, either because they were Dutch (cultural habit) or because of sustainability. Helena explains her motivation:

*“For each person it takes a different time to actually go for it and do it really. I was like everybody using a motorbike in the beginning because it was easier. And now I have a cycle and am doing everything on cycle. It's hot and I'm sweating but it's good for me, for the place and I enjoy it. I want to show that if I can do it being pregnant, anyone can do it.”*

Other informants elaborate on how they save water, make compost, stopped eating meat, but also about their yearly flights to Europe. Sustainable behaviour is a dynamic topic, differing per person. Marti<sup>69</sup> states that in her view *“No one is a sustainable person”*, nevertheless,

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<sup>68</sup> Interview conducted on 13-04-2017 with Anandi, a Spanish lady in her 40s working at PTDC.

<sup>69</sup> Interview conducted on 23-02-2017 with Marti, an American lady who has lived here for 25 years.

*"I try to be. I ride my bicycle, I never use a motor, but I take the airplane to sustainable projects. I do not have many material needs but I love art. We have an impact on our own life, but also on that of plants and animals. No one who wants to be sustainable eats meat, only if that is your only food source. Smoking is self-disrespect; you cannot claim you are an environmentalist."*

To sum up, my informants seem to have a partial but progressive attitude towards sustainability: they take responsibility for specific aspects of their behaviour but at the same time try to broaden this responsibility to other domains. Their commitment is not permanent per se, but they have an open and flexible attitude towards new insights in sustainability issues.

### 3.3 Sustainable initiatives

Sustainable behaviour is largely an individual matter in Auroville and is practiced differently from person to person. Jurgen<sup>70</sup> explains that he would not try to convince anybody to live more sustainably, because it will not make a change if it does not come from within. In his view, respect and care for the environment result from consciousness. In Auroville education plays an important role, as Anandi argues: *"Everything in Auroville is part of education. Everything we do has to serve the purpose of educating people. [...] We are all learning and teaching at the same time."* There are several initiatives in Auroville that do inspire others, some of which I have already mentioned. In this paragraph, I confine myself to waste initiatives and Sadhana Forest.

#### **Waste initiatives**

Waste is a major issue around Auroville. In the villages trash is scattered around the streets. Both Helena and Sonja explain that before, everything was wrapped in newspapers and leaves. It didn't matter if you threw it away, because it would go back to nature. Until thirty years ago there was no plastic, but when it came people kept on doing the same. On the roads, one will often smell burning plastic, when villagers are burning their trash. In response to this problem, Maggy, an energetic French lady who arrived in Auroville in 2013, gave new momentum to Litter Free Auroville with a team. This is a community initiative, with a month-long exposition and workshops which show the impact of waste and ways to upcycle it. Many Aurovilians were involved and paid a visit. This is a great example of how Aurovilians inspire each other and create awareness. Maggy<sup>71</sup> explains: *"We are trying to gather the community around this, but most of the time everyone is dealing with trash in their own way."* Maggy started the project because: *"when I see dirty places, piles of trash in the villages, I feel it is hurting me."*

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<sup>70</sup> Interview conducted on 06-03-2017 with Jurgen, a German man in his 40s, living here for seven years, farmer.

<sup>71</sup> Interview conducted on 22-03-2017 with Maggy, a French lady in her 50s who arrived in 2013.

*When I go to Ecoservice I know that if people don't clean their packaging it is going to the landfill. 25% is going to landfill, in the earth, it will not decompose, it will leak and contaminate the aquifer."*

In Auroville, however, the streets are clean and waste is recycled by Ecoservice. Nevertheless, still a lot of packaging is used in Auroville. Still, PTDC (Pour Tous Distribution Centre), a cooperative supermarket, sells many products in bulk or without wrapping. They try to sell only the most sustainable products, as Anandi<sup>72</sup> explains:

*"For years, the people of Ecoservice have tried to educate people. To make people aware of what is happening with for example landfill or the pesticides that they are spraying around. A lot of effort is being made by Auroville to create awareness and spread information, also at Pour Tous. We make people conscious, we stimulate them to bring bags so we don't need to pack things. That has been a slowly progressing effort. People are reacting very well."*

Another effort they made was to remove packaging from the dish washing liquid, some years ago. Despite the inconvenience of having to bring your own bottle, everyone appreciates it. This has saved 20.000 plastic bottles in the last three years.

Both Jessamijn<sup>73</sup> and Helena explain that because waste is visible everywhere here, they became conscious of the waste they produce. Helena clarifies: *"I try to buy everything without packaging because I know that afterwards we will have to do something with all the packaging."* She shared that this is not always easy: *"I still buy many products which are packaged in plastic, and my plastic garbage is definitely too much. I buy organic food and it has some plastic wrapping. As long as you don't have the proper option, you always have to take the least bad... It doesn't feel like a real choice, and I feel like this with many things."* Lucas<sup>74</sup> makes a critical note in this regard, namely that Auroville should become a zero-waste community but that this is impossible in a plastic age. Moreover, *"if mobile phones are not recyclable, we cannot be zero waste"*.

Eco Femme is tackling another part of the waste problem by producing reusable menstrual pads and selling menstruation cups. By doing so they make people aware of the unhealthy and unsustainable disposables used during women's periods. Jessamijn explains that they also have an education programme on menstruation. Eco Femme seems to be very effective in creating awareness and changing people's habits. Their posters hang in the public toilets and Aurovilians know them.

Overall, organisations located in Auroville are well known by Aurovilians; often they know the owners personally. In this way, the organisations are able to spread their message. Several organisations promote the use of sustainable products, and these are highly valued by Aurovilians, even by those who do not focus on a sustainable lifestyle themselves. Eco Duties is another effective

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<sup>72</sup> Interview conducted on 13-04-2017 with Anandi, a Spanish lady in her 40s working at PTDC.

<sup>73</sup> Interview conducted on 24-02-2017 with Jessamijn, a Dutch lady in her 40s.

<sup>74</sup> Interview conducted on 03-05-2017 with Lucas, a German man in his 60s, working at EcoPro.



example; these ladies make soaps and detergents. They are transparent about their ingredients and raise awareness about the harmful side effects of conventional chemical soaps.



*Waste along the road to Auroville, cows are eating from it.*

### **Sadhana Forest**

At Sadhana Forest, people are challenged to live sustainably and respect nature. Titu<sup>75</sup>, who is a long-term volunteer, remarks that many people feel inspired to change to a vegan diet. Every Friday, a tour and an eco-documentary movie night are hosted, which attracts many visitors. Mathilde mentions that the documentaries in Sadhana Forest *“opened my eyes for so many problems I didn’t even know existed.”* The environmental goals of the project are made visible with signs at the toilet, kitchen and showers, for example comparisons between the water consumption of regular toilets and taps and the Sadhana approach. In this way, visitors learn simply by walking around. All volunteers choose to commit to the community rules, which mainly pertain to a sustainable and healthy lifestyle: to only eat vegan during their stay, to not consume coffee, alcohol, drugs or cigarettes, and no sugar or processed food is allowed inside. This creates a healthy community in which people are on the same page. Those who cannot live with these principles are not allowed to stay in Sadhana but are welcome to visit. A sustainable lifestyle is encouraged explicitly, and is incorporated into all aspects of life. Only natural biodegradable soaps and tooth powder are used. Vinegar is used for cleaning and the dishes are cleaned using ashes. There is a smart water system to save water. A bucket with a hole, into which you

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<sup>75</sup> Interview conducted on 11-04-2017 with Titu, a French man in his 20s.

pour water and wash your hands under it. There is a similar system for the shower, and as you need to carry a bucket of water from the pump to the shower, you also become conscious of how much water you use for showering. Electricity is available for just a few hours a day. As some of my informants said, people learn a lot just by living in Sadhana Forest.

Auroville has a surprisingly individualistic culture for an intentional community. Nevertheless, there are many efforts to become more sustainable. Individual will-power does play an important role, as Neil<sup>76</sup> states: *“Living in Auroville doesn't automatically make you sustainable. That's still a conscious decision. If you choose to do so, then in some ways it makes it easier because there are collectives. [...] There's a lot of food that's grown in Auroville, but Auroville is not food secure. So there are ways that we could do better.”*



*Information on water usage at Sadhana Forest*

### 3.4 Agency

As we have seen, it requires agency to embody sustainability. In this paragraph I analyse the agency of my informants regarding sustainability as described in the previous paragraphs of this chapter.

<sup>76</sup> Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s; farmer.

Sustainable behaviour requires a transformation of our western lifestyle. Therefore, self-determination as well as motivation are important, as shown by initiatives concerning nature and the community.

### **Self-determination**

Sustainable agency requires self-determination as the basis for a lifestyle transformation. This appears to encompass mainly two aspects: motivation and action. Inhabitants with concerns about the environment are confronted with disappointments in Auroville, as we have seen, due to unsustainable individual choices by co-inhabitants and a lack of collective effectiveness. They have to motivate themselves and prevent themselves from becoming inert. Their actions are initiatives concerning nature as well as the community.

### **Initiatives concerning nature**

Inhabitants of Auroville deploy two kinds of actions concerning nature: prevention and restoration. Prevention mainly takes the form of minimising environmental pollution, for example by reducing waste. Restoration of damage inflicted on nature means actively taking care of the environment, for example through reforestation.

### **Initiatives concerning the community**

In Auroville most initiatives concerning nature go hand in hand with initiatives concerning the community, which implies that the two types of initiatives can be distinguished in theory but cannot be separated in practice. Two kinds of community actions can be discerned: information and education on the one hand, and inspiration and motivation on the other. Examples of information and education are attaching signs with environmental information in toilets and kitchens, writing columns in News & Notes, organising eco-documentary movie-nights, and explaining sustainable purchasing policies for customers. Examples of inspiration and motivation are that inhabitants who take sustainable initiatives serve as a living example for an alternative lifestyle to other Aurovilians, like eating vegan or riding a bicycle while pregnant, and that they encourage and try to persuade them to switch to a more sustainable lifestyle.

Some of my informants suggest that local regulation should be an additional part of actions towards a more sustainable community, while most of the others stress that true change is only possible on the basis of consciousness. The actions described above – information and education, inspiration and motivation – are in line with the latter view. The initiatives concerning the community further the embodiment of sustainability in co-inhabitants by mutual persuasion. Initiatives concerning the community are rooted in a developmental and learning approach that encompasses natural, social and spiritual dimensions.

## 3.5 Conclusion

Although Aurovilians who focus on sustainability are confronted with disappointments, they nevertheless make efforts to develop a sustainable lifestyle. They furthermore undertake preventive and restorative initiatives towards nature as well as inspirational and educational initiatives towards the community. They embody sustainable agency, based on self-determination of their motivation and their actions.

# Conclusion

In this conclusion I describe the most important research findings in the light of my research question and I reflect on the scientific and social relevance of my research, as well as on its limitations. Finally, I make recommendations for future research.

## **Research question**

We are living in the Anthropocene, human beings are the main cause of environmental degradation, attributable to our anthropocentric worldview, capitalist economy and consumer society. However, we are also the key to the solution, which is to develop a culture and a lifestyle of sustainability. Ecovillages are promising experiments in sustainability, which stimulated me to investigate one such intentional community: Auroville in Southeast India. For this research, I coined the concept of embodiment of sustainability to refer to how people can internalise and display a worldview and lifestyle focused on sustainability. My research question is: *How is sustainability embodied by the inhabitants of the community of Auroville in India?* Three aspects seem to be important in the embodiment of sustainability: the social body, the natural body, and the self. Embodiment of sustainability requires engagement of the self (personal commitment and agency) as well as connectedness to nature and the community. For each of these aspects I formulated sub-questions, and to each aspect I dedicated a chapter in this thesis. I now discuss my research findings of the three sections.

## **Community**

Embodiment of sustainability encompasses connectedness to the community. This connectedness is in essence about engaging others in a common quest for a shared culture of sustainability.

### *What is the origin of Auroville, and what are its characteristics?*

Auroville stems from the ideas of Mirra Alfassa – referred to as ‘The Mother’ by Aurovilians – and indirectly from the writings of her spiritual collaborator Sri Aurobindo. It is an intentional community, as written in the Charter: “a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity”. Furthermore, it is an open community of 2703 inhabitants, varying widely in terms of nationality as well as in terms of worldview and lifestyle. This complicates the drawing of conclusions, as it is difficult to say something about the average Aurovillian. In my informants’ views on sustainability I recognise three approaches towards sustainability: inclusive (all species, now and in the future), all-encompassing (natural, social and spiritual dimensions) and engaging (putting effort into realising a sustainable lifestyle and stimulating others).

### *How is sustainability both reinforced and challenged by Auroville's spirituality?*

The relationship between spirituality and sustainability in Auroville is complex: spirituality simultaneously furthers and impedes sustainable behaviour. An important reason for this is that Aurovilians focus on different aspects of the teachings of Alfasa: some take her words literally, others reflect on its implications, and still others are inspired by her flexibility. The spiritual roots of this community provide not only common ground for Aurovilians but also lead to heterogeneity in opinions and lifestyles, also concerning sustainability. Besides this, individuality plays an important role in Auroville; there are no rules concerning sustainability. So Auroville's spirituality can be a source of inspiration to develop a more sustainable lifestyle, but it can also lead to denying the importance and urgency of ecological challenges. The tension between spirituality and sustainability becomes apparent in the diversity of opinions regarding the realisation of the 'master plan' of Auroville: the golden dome, the irrigation of the lawn, the realisation of a lake, and the growth towards a city of 50,000 inhabitants.

### *To what extent can Auroville be regarded as an ecovillage?*

Like all intentional communities, ecovillages consist of a group of people who choose to live together and to create a lifestyle aimed at a common goal, to contribute to solving a certain problem facing society at large. Sustainability is a distinctive goal of ecovillages, although not necessarily in an exclusive way. Ecovillages have an experimental character, hold a holistic worldview regarding sustainability, and have strong shared values. Auroville is an intentional community of a hybrid character. Its roots are spiritual, and these inspire its inhabitants in different ways and degrees to live a more or less sustainable life. The individuality of the inhabitants is reflected in their disagreement about whether Auroville is an ecovillage or not. Some inhabitants reject this label, for instance because they believe that Auroville is about more important things than just sustainability, or because results and progress in this respect are insufficient. Others argue that Auroville it is partly an ecovillage or becoming one. Ecovillage or not, on some aspects Auroville is positively influencing the region as well as other places in India.

## **Nature**

Embodiment of sustainability encompasses the connectedness of human beings to nature. This connectedness relates to lifestyle, based on being part of and dependent on nature. Furthermore, this connectedness rests on an awareness of nature that is inclusive (considering nature and all of its species), holistic (encompassing all ecological issues) and fundamental (addressing all major causes).

### *What role does the natural environment play in people's lives in Auroville?*

Taking care of nature is part of the cultural heritage of Auroville; the community started with reforestation, and this still plays an important role in its activities. Furthermore, by coming to live in

Auroville my informants experienced an increasing connectedness to nature. By living and working in the community, the senses are revived and body awareness increases; for instance by living according to daylight hours, observing nature's processes, working the soil with your hands, and growing your own vegetables. Being in Auroville can lead to more sustainable behaviour, especially for inhabitants who previously lived in urban environments.

*What lifestyle and attitudes are related to being in contact with nature?*

Living and working in Auroville triggers a lifestyle which is less alienated from nature than the usual western way of living. Many of my informants embody a lifestyle focused on sustainability, although in different ways and degrees. They often focus on the ecological impact of their behaviour, now and in the future, and they have a sustainable attitude towards nature, which is neither perceived as threatening nor used in an exploitative way. My interviews revealed three different but interconnected attitudes towards nature in their lifestyle. The natural (non-alienated) attitude is essentially about entanglement (Ingold 2011), about humans being part of nature; this encompasses being connected to and being affected by nature. The ethical attitude is fundamentally about taking responsibility for (the value of) nature. A more passive (non-interfering) mode of this attitude is respecting nature as it is, while a more active mode is taking care of nature. The spiritual attitude is focused on worshipping nature, for instance in the more passive (non-interfering) mode of honouring or in the more active mode of praying. This attitude is accompanied by communication, for instance humans speaking with animals or nature speaking to humans. In this spiritual attitude towards nature, the inhabitants express a reverential distance and simultaneously an almost familial closeness.

**Self**

Embodiment of sustainability encompasses not only connectedness to nature and to the community, but also an engagement of the self (personal commitment and agency). This engagement has to be permanent and progressive, for it is based on a stable and a learning attitude towards sustainability, and is expressed through accepting responsibility for and taking care of the global ecosystem in all its aspects as much as possible.

*How do individual ideals of sustainability give shape to the lifestyle and attitudes of Aurovilians?*

Aurovilians with ideals concerning sustainability are confronted by disappointments, due to lack of environmental awareness and unsustainable behaviour among their co-inhabitants, and to a lack of collective ideals, initiatives and results. Nevertheless, my informants continue to put effort into developing a more sustainable lifestyle. Important topics for them are preventing and recycling waste as well as use of toilet paper, compost toilets, water and bicycles. Consciousness plays an important role in all this, which my informants say is stimulated by living and working in Auroville. They

demonstrate a partial but progressive attitude towards sustainability. Their commitment is not permanent per se, but they have an open and flexible attitude towards new insights in sustainability issues.

#### *What sustainable initiatives do Aurovilians take and how do they express agency?*

For an intentional community, Auroville has quite a strong culture of individualism. Nevertheless, there are many efforts to become more sustainable. In these efforts, my informants demonstrate agency. This agency is based on self-determination: confronted with disappointments, they might motivate themselves to not become inert but instead to take action through initiatives concerning nature and the community. Initiatives concerning nature are focused on either prevention of damage (like waste initiatives) or restoration of damage (like reforestation). These initiatives are mostly accompanied by community involvement, either information and education (like organising an eco-documentary movie-night) or inspiration and motivation (like setting a living example for a more sustainable lifestyle). These initiatives are based on the conviction that lifestyles can only be changed by raising consciousness, so they are tacitly focused on furthering the embodiment of sustainability. Initiatives concerning the community are founded in a developmental and learning approach which encompasses natural, social and spiritual dimensions.

#### **Scientific and societal relevance**

Following Lockyer and Veteto (2008:53), this thesis strives to “narrow the gap between sustainability practices and academic ideals”. To do so, I focus on the embodiment of sustainability among inhabitants of an ecovillage in India. By introducing and developing the theoretical concept of embodiment of sustainability – based on a critical analysis of the scientific literature and noticing an omission in the conceptual frameworks – I seek to contribute to the scientific framework for investigating sustainable alternatives to our western lifestyle. By doing empirical fieldwork in Auroville, I attempt to contribute to the scientific knowledge of ecovillages, for instance the dynamics (achievements and challenges) which are present in an experimental township. My goal is to show how sustainability can be embodied, and how people can take responsibility for their impact on the environment. Environmental degradation and the decrease in biodiversity show that our connection with nature has weakened. This research explores viable forms of sustainable behaviour. In this way, I hope to inspire future research concerning sustainability as well as individual and collective developments towards more sustainable lifestyles.

#### **Limitations and future research**

This research has some limitations, mainly because of the choices I made. I chose not to read any of the books by or on Alfassa and Sri Aurobindo, since my focus was not on their spirituality but on my



informants' interpretations and how this affects their stance towards sustainability. Nevertheless, insight into the spiritual background of Auroville could shed more light on the complex relation between its spirituality and its sustainability. Additionally, it could be worthwhile to investigate Auroville's alternative educational and healing methods with their focus on sustainability. Both come in many different forms, reflecting varying perspectives, and thereby will be a rich source of information. Also, more attention could have been paid to social expectations regarding sustainability. During interviews and by observation I did not succeed in unravelling these expectations, future research could use this thesis as a starting point for finding these unspoken rules.

I chose interviewing as my main research method in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the behaviour and lifestyle of my informants. However, a combination with surveys could have yielded more background information about the inhabitants and their heterogeneity. The Aurovilians I interviewed had an interest in sustainability. It was a broad group of informants, from different age groups and nationalities and with varying durations of stay in Auroville. Although I did not notice any significant differences, it would have been interesting to see whether these factors affect their views and behaviour. Talking with inhabitants who do not regard sustainability as being important would also have added to this research. This could have yielded a better picture of the current dynamics in Auroville. I did not speak much with local Indians, but by letting them express their views and opinions, it would be possible to draw comparisons between the views and behaviour of local Indians and non-Indians.

All these limitations are simultaneously suggestions for further research. Most important in my opinion, however, would be future research concerning the embodiment of sustainability in other ecovillages, as I believe this to be relevant for science as well as for society. During the final stage of working on my thesis I became interested in the political aspects of embodiment of sustainability, and I look forward to investigate these aspects in future research.

This research also has limitations at a more fundamental level. Besides by my bodily presence, my data collection is also influenced by my opinions, interpretations and analyses, formed by my background, education, culture and experiences. I am, for instance, a feminist striving for equality for all humans, and as an environmentalist I strive for the equality of all living beings and for living with respect for nature. I aim to embody this, for instance by the way I look, behave and talk, which will be noticed by my informants. For these reasons, I state that research can never be fully objective or value-free. This can strengthen one's research, as long as researchers are transparent about their thoughts, presence and feelings. Above all, I chose to research a topic that I am quite passionate about, and as Nader (1972:303) points out: "While scientific findings may be ideally viewed as 'value-free', [...] the choice of subject for scientific inquiry is most certainly not". Scheper-Hughes (1995:417-418) remarks that although anthropologists are a "flawed and biased instrument of cultural translation",

nevertheless we should use “our ability to listen and to observe carefully and with empathy and compassion”. I have sought to do so.

My topic turned out to be more controversial than I had initially expected. My informants held conflicting opinions, and quite passionately so. Their involvement with spirituality and their commitment to their spiritual leader was new to me and hard to identify with. I did not expect that sustainability would have anything to do with it, but it complicated the matter and made it into a sensitive topic. It was quite challenging to represent both my own reflections and interpretations and those of my informants in a way that they could agree with and in a way that does justice to their personalities and vision. My informants were quite open and nuanced, but also protective towards their community and concerned about creating a negative image of Auroville. It was striking to see how much response I received after sending them my draft thesis. Some wanted to reformulate their quotes, others asked for a more nuanced story about the spiritual teachings. I tried to deal with this in my thesis in the best way possible as an anthropologist, inspired by other anthropologists. As in Ingold’s (2011:238) view: “anthropologists work and study *with* people. [...] [It] opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being.” Similarly, Lassiter writes about collaborative research, defining it as: “the collaboration of researchers and subjects in the production of ethnographic texts, both fieldwork and writing” (2005:84).

### **Reflection**

Initially I found Auroville a bit disappointing. I had expected to find a close and warm community, living in close connection to nature, with a strong and shared focus on a more sustainable way of life. However, by living, volunteering and doing my fieldwork in this intentional community, I gained more insight into the complexities facing the inhabitants, and more admiration for the creativity and perseverance that they put into their efforts and initiatives concerning sustainability. In Auroville, I developed my body awareness and body care, sensory perception and understanding of nature and its processes, and natural eating and sleeping habits: I strengthened my embodiment of sustainability.

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# Appendix I

Below I list the informants I quoted in this thesis:

Interview conducted on 15-02-2017 with Tineke, a Dutch lady in her 60s who arrived in 1980. She is one of the pioneers. I was invited at her house, where I asked questions over a cup of tea.

Interview conducted on 17-02-2017 with Rod, an American man in his 60s, who has been in Auroville for some decades. He is a philosopher, teacher and writer. He has read much of Sri Aurobindo. We talked about Auroville on the terrace of a café.

Interview conducted on 18-02-2017 with Sonja, a Dutch lady in her 60s, she is one of the pioneers. The interview took place in her garden.

Interview conducted on 23-02-2017 with Marti, an American lady who has lived here for 25 years. She is quite active and outspoken about sustainability. We talked over lunch at Solar Kitchen.

Interview conducted on 24-02-2017 with Jessamijn, a Dutch lady in her 40s. Together with Kathy, she started Eco Femme, a brand which produces reusable menstrual pads. They focus on hygiene and sustainability.

Conversation on 05-03-2017 with Gijs, a Dutch man in his 40s.

Interview conducted on 06-03-2017 with Jurgen, a German man in his 40s who lives here for seven years. He is a farmer and has a strong bond with nature.

Interview conducted on 10-03-2017 with Helena, a French lady in her 30s; newcomer and yoga teacher. I got to know her by her classes on Acroyoga, while interviewing her on a terrace, she appeared to be working towards a sustainable lifestyle.

Interview conducted on 18-03-2017 with Priya, a British lady in her 70s who lives on a farm. I got to know her by working on the farm, the interview took place in her house.

Interview conducted on 21-03-2017 with Jasmin, a farmer in her 50s, living here for 8 years, but was involved already a long time before. After working at the farm, I sat with her in the grass and discussed my questions.

Interview conducted on 22-03-2017 with Maggy, a French lady in her 50s who arrived in 2013. I interviewed her during the Litter Free Auroville project, we sat at a table in the atelier where she prepared some things.

Interview conducted on 24-03-2017 with Kavitha, a Dutch/Indian lady in her 20s; 3rd generation Aurovilian. She works with the youth, and is the only person I interviewed who is born and raised here. We sat down in the garden where we discussed my questions.

Interview conducted on 27-03-2017 with Christian, a French man in his 50s who came in 2010, living on a farm. I have been working on his farm for two weeks, one day we met in a café for the interview.

Interview conducted on 28-03-2017 with Francisco, a French man in his 50s; living for two years on a farm. One day after the teabreak, we sat down at the floor of the common space for the interview.

Interview conducted on 31-03-2017 with Neil, a Canadian man in late 30s, he lives on a farm. Before he gave courses on sustainability.

Interview conducted on 11-04-2017 with Titu, a French man in his 20s, a longterm volunteer at Sadhana Forest.

Interview conducted on 13-04-2017 with Anandi, a Spanish lady in her 40s working at PTDC.

Interview conducted on 14-04-2017 with Mathilde, a French lady in her 30s who arrived in 2013. She makes her own sustainable cosmetics and is starting up a sustainable community with friends in Auroville.

Interview conducted on 02-05-2017 with Krupa, a young Indian lady from the USA.

Interview conducted on 03-05-2017 with Lucas, a German man in his 60s, working at EcoPro.

Interview conducted on 04-05-2017 with Lisbeth, a Dutch lady in her 70s who arrived in 1970. She is one of the pioneers.

Interview conducted on 04-05-2017 with Isabelle, a French lady in her 30s.



# Appendix II

In the mornings I have been working at different farms. It is a pleasant way to connect my body with nature, to do physical work, to see how the plants grow, to feel the sun getting warmer. It was also a good way to get to know Aurovilians. Most other volunteers I worked with however, were visitors.

I started working at **Buddha garden** in the mornings from 6 to 9, I would go there by bicycle, on my way the dark night would change into a light morning. While working the sun would warm us until we were burning. Then at nine, we shared an Indian breakfast. We did much weeding, watering and some harvesting. Only outside volunteers come and stay there for two weeks. It is an organic farm, fully off the grid.

**Terra soul** – A community where people less than 10 people live. Some of them work on their gardens, also several volunteers help out. They practice permaculture, they have Ama's (Indian ladies) who work in the kitchen. Everybody works from 8 to 12, at 10 there is a tea break with lemon juice, milk tea or coffee.

**Botanical** garden – the main focus is the preservation of plants, besides that they offer classes for school children to teach about water and nature. Many Newcomers work there as their volunteer service, there are not so much visitor-volunteers. The work is scattered and not really coordinated. The work is done from 8:30 until 12, with a tea break in between.

**Solitude** – famous for permaculture in Auroville, they have much land, quite some Aurovilians and volunteers involved, a weekly vegetable basket system, a lunch café and give a tour every Saturday.

**Windara** – small place run by an Indian family, with cows, goats and chicken and a small plot for gardening.

**AuroOrchard** – huge lot with six people living there, about ten long term volunteers (those who commit daily for the length of at least a month) and several short-term volunteers help on the land in the mornings. There is a close volunteer community and a very good relationship with the owners. We all share breakfast at 9:30, the work is from 8 until 12. They practice permaculture and produce a lot of vegetables and fruits, but also have goats and chicken. Tasks include selective weeding, mulching and harvesting.

**Discipline** - a big organic farm without machines, there are some long term volunteers who stay there for a year but no short term volunteers. Further, a couple of people live there permanently and there are paid local Indian workers. They have both vegetables and animals.

**Sadhana forest** - a very close volunteer community who live and work together. Every day we work from six to twelve sometimes followed by a cooking shift. These shifts are called seva's: work done for the community. The main project is tree planting and care, in order to create a forest. For this

community living in full respect with nature is important, and mainly living a sustainable lifestyle. You can not stay there if you do not respect the guidelines. I have lived with them for two weeks, a place that was full of love and respect, where I experienced a total freedom to express how I would like, a bodily freedom.



*Watering plants*



*Gardening in the early morning*