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Commerce In a cocoon

by N.S. Ramnath

Spirituality, environmentalism and business blend in an international commune in South India

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Image: M Lakshmanan for Forbes India

WORK IS FUN: Acoustics consultancy firm Sound Wizard's Dider Weiss with a colleague outside the Auroville office

Fear overwhelmed Kenji Matsumoto. Alone at sea, in his sailing boat, off the coast of Japan, he thought his time was up. The ocean was having a mood swing, taunting him to try and escape as the waves rose higher; the sky grimaced, turning an ugly shade of grey and the wooden deck of his boat crackled and splintered. The Pacific tossed the boat around like an excited child as Matsumoto felt a chill creep up his spine. And then something happened. He felt calm, part of the dancing sea, the angry winds and the bawling heavens. The Grim Reaper slunk away. His body, the boat, the sea and the storm became one.

That was many years ago and thousands of miles away. Matsumoto had more adventures on his sailing boat. Once tossed off in Australian shores, he set down to repair his boat and discovered his love for wood. He went back to Japan, learnt carpentry, met an Italian lady and got married. But he always craved for the feeling of that night, when he was one with the elements. He found it in Auroville, a spiritual commune south of Chennai, Tamil Nadu. He is one with the elements in his workshop, working on wood.

Matsumoto's approach to furniture is not that of a typical carpenter's. He looks at a piece of wood, meditates on it and the wood responds to him. "The wood tells me what it wants to become," he says. Imported Japanese machines blend with old traditions to shape the wood. Every piece is

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unique.

Matsumoto's Japanese Furniture is just one of the 120 commercial units in Auroville. They are all small — employing about 5,000 people from nearby villages — but their impact is being felt much beyond the green belt around this model town. Most of these businesses are more an expression of the founder's inner-self rather than a lust for a billion-dollar market. Many are expressions of a concern for the environment.

Compressed earth block (CEB) presses from Aureka's were used to rebuild thousands of homes in Gujarat after the 2001 earthquake and in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami. The next time at a party, someone boasts of wearing a pair of organic jeans, check the label. It'll probably read Colors of Nature. Architecture, electronics, clothing, jewelry, books and renewable energy; you find everything in Auroville.

Hotbed of Creativity

They call themselves Aurovilleans. They are creative and are not afraid to experiment.



Image: M Lakshmanan for Forbes

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WEAVING DREAMS: Israeli Danny Merguel of Wellpaper in his workshop

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Enterprise at the Spiritual Commune

An Israeli, Merguel was going back home with his wife, Orly, and their three children after working as a chartered accountant at auditing firm KPMG in New York. They decided to spend a year in Auroville. Two months after they landed here, the tsunami struck. The families it shattered, the homes it destroyed, the lives it took gave the Merguels a new purpose. Orly Merguel used to train people in papier mache and crafts back in Israel. The Merguels set up Wellpaper, trained 60 people and exported handicrafts. Danny Merguel, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt like most Aurovilleans, says the business is picking up. Ethnic apparel chain Fabindia just agreed to sell a few of its products. "And that's great," he says.

The Merguels have been here for the last five years. Others like Robert Trunz have been here since the mid-70s. After his schooling in Switzerland, Trunz wanted to travel.

He spent a few months working as a sandblaster, a high-paying job which provided enough for two years of travelling. He came by road to India at a time when India was all the rage among the hippies, and found his way to Auroville, "which was then a desert". But, he loved the place — and knew he would settle there. He went back to his old job to earn enough and come back to Auroville.

Electricity was in short supply. Diesel-powered generators did not appeal to Trunz. He designed a windmill to pump water from the earth. It worked. Visitors to Auroville were impressed, and asked him to supply the machines to them. That was the start of his business. Today, his company Aureka makes windpumps, earth construction equipment and shredders.

Its biggest business is earth construction equipment, which too has something fundamentally Auroville about it. In Auroville, buildings appear to grow out of the earth. The reason: Most of the buildings use compressed stabilised earth blocks. In India, if

"You will hear a hundred different things about Auroville, but there is something that everyone would agree with. Auroville is a hotbed of creativity," says Danny Merguel, an Aurovillean.

Auroville was created in 1968. It was born from the vision of Mirra Alfassa, born to a Turkish father and Egyptian mother, who came to India in 1914 and became the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, an Indian nationalist, philosopher and poet, in Pondicherry (now Puducherry). 'Mother' Mirra Alfassa expressed her vision so: "There should be somewhere upon earth a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of good will, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme truth." And Auroville is indeed a melting pot that attracts people from all over the world.

An Israeli, Merguel was going back home with his wife, Orly, and their three children after working as a chartered accountant at auditing



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you want advice on earth architecture and earth construction, you go to Auroville Earth Institute. One of its designs, the Auram 3000 which makes CEBs, has been exported to over 40 countries.



Image: M Lakshmanan for Forbes India

DIFFERENT STROKES: Spaniard Jesus Ciriza Larraona, founder, Colors of Nature, an organic fabric company

“A lot of us were environmentalists in the first place,” says Jesus Ciriza Larraona. An engineer from Spain, he came to Auroville in the mid-80s. On a visit to Kashmir, he was shocked to see the way carpets were manufactured. The amount of chemicals and metal waste released into the earth stimulated him to think of ways to manufacture organic dyes. He spent the next few years travelling and studying natural dying methods ancient Indians used. In 1993, he founded Colors of Nature to make organic jeans and fabric. The scale of operations is small. It produced about 40,000 metres of fabric in 2008, making Rs. 75 lakh.

Didier Weiss is another dedicated Aurovillean. He owned a sound studio in France before moving to Auroville. He worked in the solar kitchen, the community’s collective dining hall, for a few years. During special events, he would help with organising sound.

Eventually, he decided to go full time at the work he was good at, and set up Sound Wizard to advice professional studios. As India’s rich list grew, creating a demand for well designed home theatres, Sound Wizard has expanded to home entertainment segment as well. The company counts Oscar winner A.R. Rahman among its clients. It helped Rahman set up his sound studio in 2006.

Beyond Auroville

Not everyone is in tune with Auroville’s rhythm. Some come here just for inspiration and then leave with their idea. Dilip Kapur loves the idea of Auroville. He stays there, teaches at its schools, but his business — Hidesign, a premium fashion leather goods company — is not a part of Auroville. Hidesign started as a two-people workshop in 1978, and has grown to a 3,000-strong company now. It focussed on export markets initially, and then built its brand in India as well. French luxury brand Louis Vuitton has a stake in the company.

The story of Hidesign is an example of Auroville’s limitations. “I found Auroville stifling,” Kapur says. If Hidesign had been a part of Auroville, he couldn’t have sold a stake to Louis Vuitton. All commercial units in Auroville are owned by different trusts that come under the Auroville Foundation. A third of the profits the commercial units make go to running the township. Yet, these companies face the same challenges — funding, marketing, HR — that other companies face.

A half-built structure stands in the Colors of Nature campus. It is supposed to hold an automated natural dying unit. Canadian funds are stuck somewhere due to bureaucracy.

Merguel says, “We are discussing how Wellpaper will sustain itself after we move on. We have to create a second level of leadership.” But that’s not going to be easy, for Auroville businesses have a smaller pool of talent to choose from. “We have a lot of skilled people who are volunteers, but there is a constraint when we want to hire people for salaries,” says Larraona. Everyone in Auroville gets maintenance for the work they do.



Image: M Lakshmanan for Forbes India

EARTH POWER: Aureka's Robert Trunz, who settled in Auroville in the 1970s, outside his office

Some years ago, Kapur sat in Casablanca, an upmarket outlet in Puducherry, to launch a new collection of leather bags. He shared the stage with Mahesh Bhatt, who was in Puducherry in connection with Jism, a Bollywood movie starring John Abraham and Bipasha Basu. Bhatt said, “We are better than spiritual people. They promise heaven only after you die, but we promise heaven here and now.” Wine and music flowed after the launch.

Such salesmanship is beyond most businessmen in Auroville. Larraona walks barefoot between his home and factory. “I lost my pair of slippers sometime back... maybe someone stole it. I didn’t buy another pair.” His biggest concern is not about how to sell more jeans, but about rampant

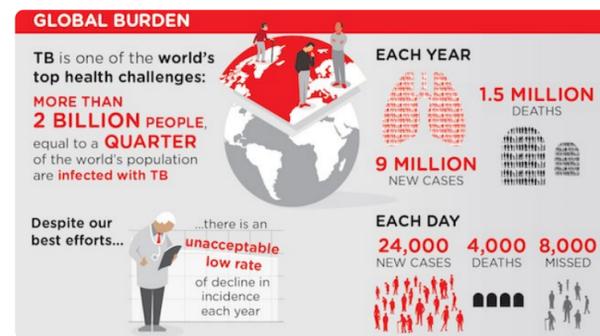
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consumerism. “People keep buying things. They shouldn’t,” he says. But how will his business grow? “People shouldn’t buy more, but more people should buy.”

Similarly, Aureka’s Trunz says he cannot read a balance sheet. “I show it to my son — he studies commerce — he looks at it, and says it’s fine.”

The Way Forward

One way out for these companies would be to follow the Hidesign model. But that could destroy the township as these units fund up to 30 percent of the operational cost of Auroville.

And most of them are not interested in profits. “It would be inappropriate to call these businesses,” says Hemant Lamba who works with Aurore, a renewable energy firm. “All the businesses here are based on respecting individuals, respect for earth, and a deep desire to serve others. Money is just a tool, not the end.”

Some would argue that the town has not really lived up to Alfassa’s vision. The plan was to house 50,000 people; about 2,000 from 50 different countries live there today. Legally, Auroville is very much a part of India — and under the patronage of the Indian government. Auroville Foundation, which administers the township, is headed by an Indian Administrative Services officer. The charter allows Aurovilleans complete autonomy — but that has also led to squabbles among the residents. But to go by these measures would be to miss the point about Auroville.

It does not brand itself as an international township, but as a ‘universal city in the making’. Mistakes will be made and lessons will be learnt. To fit these experiments into a successful business model would go against the spirit of Auroville. The residents like to quote Alfassa again: “For those who are satisfied with the world as it is, Auroville obviously has no reason to exist.”

So, is there a way to measure its success at all? Use more parameters, says Merguel. “You can measure your success by your salary and say A earns more than B, so A is more successful. Now add one parameter. Number of parties you attend. The ranking might change.” Larraona adds, “We measure growth by consumption. I believe it’s wrong. We should measure it by the respect we show to the environment, the respect we show to the people around you, your children and your grandchildren and your great grandchildren.”

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