That’s me - the baby sitting on the edge of the windowsill - one of the first children to live in Auroville. I was born in Kampala, Uganda, and I came to Pondicherry with Shyama, my mother, and my two brothers in 1965 when I was one and a half years-old.

We lived in Pondy with Frederick, Shyama’s partner, because even if Auroville land had been bought, nothing was constructed yet. Vincenzo had fixed up a car and we used to have to push it through the sandy canyon road on visits. We had a hut with a sand floor where we used to spend the weekends.

After a while, The Mother made it quite clear that it was essential to protect the land by having people live on it and she wanted to begin development of the City of Dawn.

Frederick had given all of his money to the Mother, which she gave back to him to use for looking after us children - but also to build a solid house, so that people would know that Auroville was here to stay.

It was the first permanent house built for Auroville - Auroson’s Home in Certitude.

I grew up with the exciting idea that there was going to be this place here called Auroville, and that people from all over the world were going to come.
And so it was all very real and exciting in my imagination, and imagination is very important … even if the reality was that there were only big fields, no roads, no water, no phones!

Some of my memories of those early days are of the times when Auroville land was bought. I remember us painting «AV» on the marker stones or visiting fields that had been purchased. For me, every bit of land was like a promise of the incredible future that was going to come!
The Inauguration of Auroville took place when I was four years old and it was really a special moment because I can still remember it very clearly.

I’m there in the photo just between my brothers. I also remember wondering if the people at the inauguration were going to stay … but the next day they were all gone and it was just the few of us again.

In those days there was a lot of poverty. I remember feeling like a «doctor» because I knew how to clean and bandage wounds for the grateful adult workers. There were no health facilities nearby except Jipmer for emergencies.

There wasn't much vegetation either – just the tamarind trees by the bakery. With the heat, the interest for us kids was to try to find a waterhole you could swim in. And so I know most of the wells in and around Auroville because those were the places we kids would go to swim. The water level then was just a bit below ground level at Solitude, and sadly now, the water table has dropped so much!

The work for building the Matrimandir started in the early ’70s and then went on for decades. The Matrimandir was the central place where everyone - all the kids, all the adults, all the new people, everybody - came to work and it was fantastic. All the differences between people melted when you were building the Matrimandir – everyone came together, and we came together for that!
In 1973 the inauguration of the Matrimandir was held in the early morning. We all carried one stone and walked down into the crater of the Matrimandir and dropped our stone into the cement mixer. The people employed from the village were incredibly adept at digging and had dug the majority of the foundation leaving these little stairways to go down into the bottom of the crater. It was really beautiful and had an ancient feel.

In the Auroville of that time, there were lots of long quiet meditations when we inaugurated new buildings and at the start of school. Even if these were sometimes boring for me as a kid I am grateful today that it was a normal part of our life.

A lot of births in Auroville happened in our house because it was the only proper house. My room was the birthing place so I always had to move out!! The upside was that I could attend those births and they were always such an amazing experience. You were welcoming a new soul to Auroville - it was so very special!

The result was that I wanted to be a midwife. Later I went to work in the Health Center for a while with Janna, who was running it. But it wasn’t the same. I did a lot of different types of work growing up in Auroville, including growing seedlings for forestation and working in the bakery.

I left Auroville in ’87 for the US. In a way, I was relieved to be a «nobody» there after so many years in a small community and a small village. What I loved about America is that it’s very open about information and about celebrating people’s successes. Nobody is envious of your success and people congratulate each other for their achievements saying «You’re doing well, good for you!» Also making money is not in itself a bad thing. So I appreciated that type of attitude for the dynamism it brings.
When I returned from the US after 14 years, I worked with the Working Committee (that was a shock because Auroville wasn’t the same place I had left). Later I also worked at L’Avenir for town planning. It was interesting because I saw why there is a need to organize but I also saw how you have to adapt to people’s enthusiasm. Basically, enthusiasm is what is driving everything here, and everything that exists has been driven by people’s enthusiasm!

But not everybody has good ideas answering to the needs of the moment. So I think we should have been more pro-active in illustrating what was needed in order to channel the enthusiasm and to make things happen - to help people adapt their plan to what’s really needed. I feel it’s important to work locally within the communities so they can take part in the decision-making for what’s happening, and so the decisions are owned by everybody.

I later worked at the Auroville Radio and I am an executive of Auroville Art Service, which is an umbrella to support the activities of artists. We hope to encourage the discussion of culture and to bring more art and artists into the building of the city. We publish an art and culture magazine called MagzAV that occasionally comes out and a weekly newsletter. Krishna along with a dedicated team are working very actively, and we collaborate with Acres for Auroville and the Unity Pavilion for the «Art for Land» action.

Along the way, I met my then husband and we had two children, Isa, my daughter and my son Roshan, who are both at present in Auroville. So my parents, myself and my children make 3 Auroville generations!
Now the Land Board takes up most of my time, with me having gone full circle from painting marker stones as a kid to working to completing the puzzle of the still-missing land. The Land Board mandate is theoretically three years. But because it's so complex, and you're dealing with so much history, it takes you fully one year to really understand the work. There's a lot of backlog from the past too - we're still dealing with outstanding paperwork from 1969 and court cases that have been going on for 14 years. There's the complexity and the history of the transfer of deeds of property. And you need to understand the background to respond to the people who come in with issues. Luckily, I can still make phone calls to previous Land Board members who were there or involved at the time to find out the history from them.
The Land Board also stewards many acres of landholdings and protecting them for future projects. And we work on all the many little «fires» to put out. The work needs to be coordinated with the FAMC and the Working Committee, and the Auroville Foundation. I can understand why people wouldn't want to take it on full-time because it's so exhausting. The work is enormous!

I have to say that I really enjoy my team and we have a really great staff! We bought 30 acres in the year of COVID! And we succeeded in instituting weekly meetings with the Working Committee and the FAMC, which is really helpful in speeding up purchases and making decisions. We needed to have those processes set up to move more efficiently.

After 53 years, we can say the Auroville Experiment has worked! There has been a massive amount of millions and millions of dollars worth of investment and energy and time. So one of the things that I constantly bring up to our neighboring people who are being approached by speculators but who also come to the Land Board, is that you have to think of the bigger picture. You're here and we're here and we're in this together, working for the benefit of all (health centers, dental clinics, schools, training, etc). Everything isn't perfect, but we're here living this adventure together!

During the years of Auroville's development, no one would have believed what we have succeeded in doing. So, it is very hurtful to see a new element of people intervening in Auroville who are interested in just poaching off of the resources and work we've all done. I think The Mother was very aware of this and really foresaw what we're facing now when she said «You have no idea of the power of human greed», and that is why she said that the first thing to do is to secure the land.

With fewer people in the early days, it was easier to have a shared culture about the values that are important. The invisible values had great meaning. Also I think we were more dynamic because we were much freer - we weren't experts - we just were trying things out.

When I was young, people were excited and happy to build or give money and make stuff happen! Life was harsh, but there was a sense of adventure.

With Auroville's growth, there came the need for more organization, and certain rules. But every situation is unique and so you need to have a bit of wisdom about decisions because sometimes committees or blanket rules are too rigid and do not build goodwill. The only thing we can count on is goodwill and we have to do whatever we can to protect that goodwill. Our biggest asset is people - their goodwill and, as I said before, their enthusiasm.
My parents’s generation wanted to see the materialization of the dream, to get the material city built. They were like «Let's get this thing on the road!» But the material growth alone is not going to build the new society we aim for.

All my life I have been involved with the Auroville experiment, deploying my life into a place and a belief. I continue to work to build Auroville and hold it as close as possible to the imagination I had as a kid of something new and great.

Renu
Auroville, April 2021