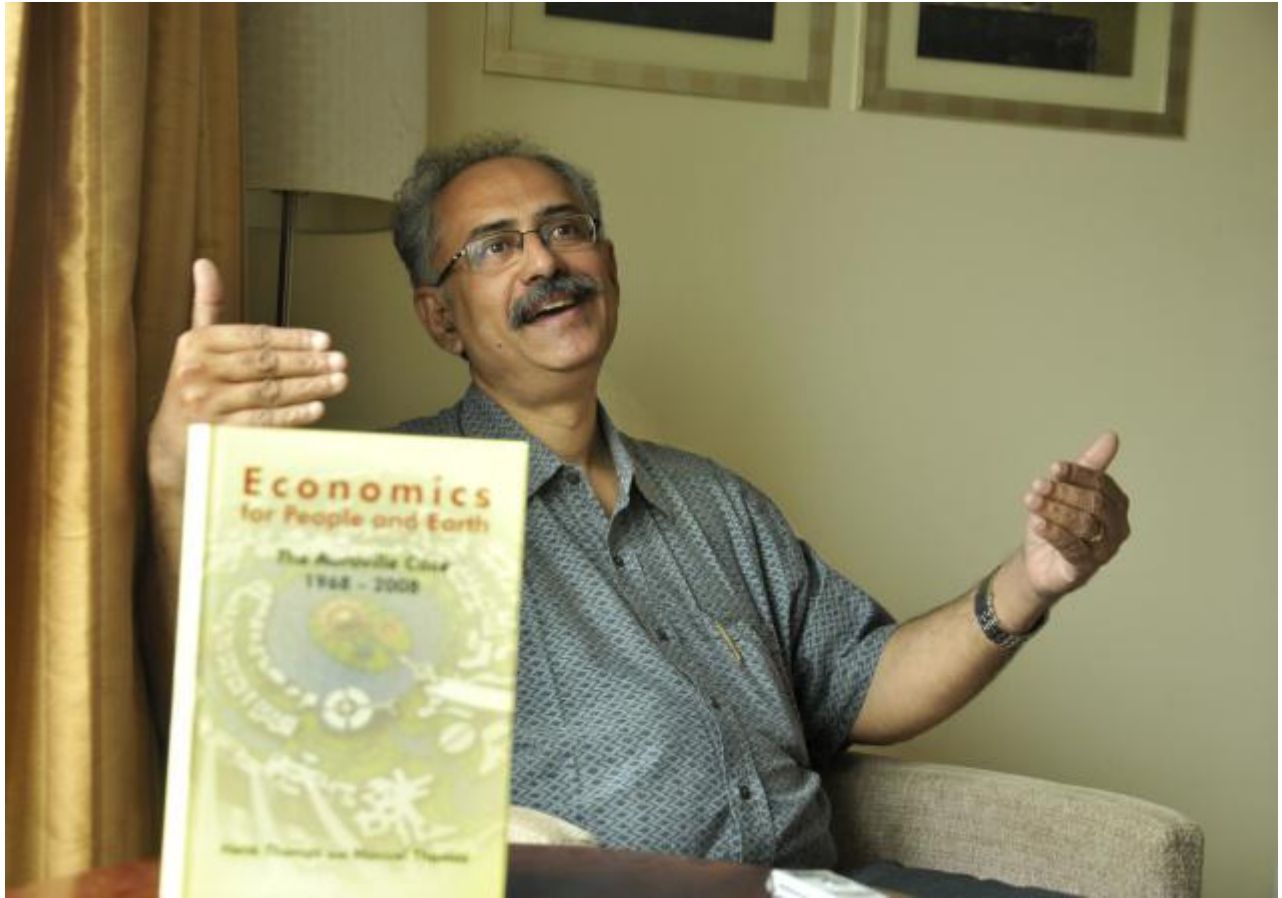


A community spirit

VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED



The Hindu The ethos of the township is based on an alternative way of life, says Manuel.
Photo: K. Gopinathan

The enigma about life within the Auroville township has answers in the recent book by Henk Thomas and Manuel Thomas

For most tourists visiting Pondicherry, a quick stop at Auroville forms a definite part of their itinerary. The township was started in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa, also known as 'The Mother', who was the spiritual collaborator of the Indian nationalist Aurobindo Ghose after he moved to Pondicherry. The star attraction at Auroville is the Matrimandir, a huge futuristic looking golden-coloured orb that is used as a place of meditation and yoga for its residents. Tourists often wonder what the residents of Auroville do at the sprawling township and while the Visitors' Centre provides brief information, it still leaves many questions unanswered.

A new book written by Henk Thomas, a Dutch economist; and Manuel Thomas, a Chennai-based chartered accountant; on the story of Auroville, provides information on the township's evolution from the time it was established on a dusty and barren plateau to its lush existence now. Called 'Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008', the book is the result of painstaking research that included the scrutiny of some 3800 balance sheets.

While research by the authors is primarily premised on the economics of the place, Manuel clarifies that the book is not an economics text book but a useful work on the township itself. The author, who researched for the book over 15 years, was in Bangalore recently to discuss its significance.

The Mother, Manuel says, envisaged Auroville to be someplace in the world where people could come together and live in harmony. It was started in a bare-bones way and the early residents embarked on a large-scale forestation programme that is responsible for the greenery that greets visitors today. “The residents include people from 43 countries and the ethos of the township is based on an alternative way of life that revolves around an alternative economy,” says Manuel.

One significant principle of the alternative approach that Manuel talks about is that there is no concept of private property at Auroville. There is also no circulation of money inside the township. In its worldview, the township tries to present itself as the antithesis of Western capitalism and an ideal system of living where everyone’s basic needs are met. Residents take part in various activities at the township including afforestation, alternative energy, ecological advancements and architectural models that uses local material.

Currently, around 2,500 people live in Auroville and 4,000 workers come in daily from the surrounding villages. Manuel says that Auroville aims at having a population of 50,000 people eventually. Potential residents need to spend two years imbibing the principles of Auroville before they are welcomed as permanent members of the community.

Henk and Mannuel’s book provides an exhaustive exploration of Auroville. The book covers its history, its engagement with social entrepreneurship, the development of commercial and service units at Auroville, the characteristics of the alternative economy at the township and also looks at how Auroville sustains itself on a mixture of its own ability to generate income as well as funds provided by grants and donations. The book will be immensely useful for anyone interested in Auroville and in understanding how an alterative system of economy works. The book can be purchased from the online portal www.yikke.com.