



Interview with Abha Tewari Thirty Years of Shradhanjali



Abha in the early 1980's

Q: Tell us how did you get the idea to start Shradhanjali? When was it?

AT: It was sometime at the end of 1979, that we had the idea, because we began in early 1980, sometime in January. I don't remember the exact date. Those who were living here at that time will remember how difficult it was to make ends meet in terms of even a proper meal everyday. We had just dry

bread for breakfast, with sometimes a bit of jam. There was a need for more finance and that was the first motivation. The second reason was that Radhika and I had planned to work with our hands and make crafts in order to support ourselves during our Newcomers period. We had planned this in the University [in Delhi], before coming to Auroville. When we got here, it was not required and we both got immersed in other work. So, it was only one and half years later that we started the project.

Q: Why dry flowers?

AT: It is something that both of us had already done. I, in school and I think Radhika too. It was something in our minds. It was not just dry flowers, it was also spray painting, or with a tooth brush, etc. We definitively wanted to do something with flowers. We had already collected ferns and grasses from the hills. So, the idea was there even if we did not implement it immediately.

Q: How did you start, how did you find a place, the funds, etc.?

AT: The first thing we did was fundraising: a few people like my parents, perhaps Prem Malick (I am not sure now) and a few people donated some 5000 or 6000 Rupees. The first thing we did was to buy the equipment for screen-printing. We bought ink and learnt screen-printing and printing a fund-raising letter. We said: "We are 2 young Indian girls, bla, bla, bla and we sent it to a few people". We probably got 5,000 Rupees or so more and then 500 Rupees here and there. We started with a maximum of 10,000/12,000 Rupees. It was really really small.

Q: What about the place?

AT: AT that time, there was this place vacant where is the *Maison de l'Agenda* in Aspiration near *Pour Tous*. It was after *Aurofuture*, the architect office had shifted and it was pretty much empty. There were a few small activities happening, but we were told that we could use a small corner, in a tiny corner which was in a mess. It was more like a storeroom and we were told, I don't remember who was in charge, but we were just told, you can use this corner. It is where we began. We just needed the place for the screen-printing table and our small tables.

In fact, we were given a table by the *Aurofuture* Office which had shifted. So, we had the place to start.

Q: Do you remember your first order?

AT: The first customer was the Auroville Today Exhibition [which toured India in 1980]. We send the first lot to the exhibition in Mumbai [in February 1980]. Both Radhika and I had school and college friends there. [We wrote to them] and they came and bought the things, just because we had done them ourselves. It was our first income.

Then Roma who was working for what is today Maroma, it was known as Bati [incense] Company or *Encens d'Auroville* then, she took some of our products to her marketing contacts. Our first client in Mumbai was *Contemporary Arts and Crafts*, they are still our clients, then *The Shop* in Delhi and in Kolkatta, *The Good Companions*. Except for *The Shop*, it was people that Roma found. In Mumbai, Roma put us in contact with Bombay Swadeshi Stores. So, it started with 2 shops in Mumbai, 1 in Delhi and 1 in Kolkatta. It was more than enough for two of us. Sometimes, we had to get helpers; all sort of people used to come and help us, mainly from Aspiration[Community]. Whoever we could catch in Aspiration, came to be our screen-printing *tambi* [small brother/helper]; to pass the paper from the

screen-printing table to the racks. We had so little funds, that we built the infrastructure very very slowly. It was slow and laid-back.

Q: When did you get your first export order?

AT: I don't remember, Christian and Michel [two young French] joined us in 1981 when they came to Auroville. Around the same time, we had taken our first girl, Valarmathi. She had gone to *Encens* for an interview, they did not take her, so we asked her to join.



Michel at the beginning of Shradhanjali

I don't remember now if she joined first or after Christian and Michel. We were five, Radhika and I, the two French boys and one Tamil girl.

Q: *What about your first Export order?*

AT: It must have been around 1985, but in the meantime, we had built more contacts in India.

It was working rather slowly, but it was working by then. Soon we could shift to the other side of the building, in two rooms in the front of the building, [where the Financial Service in Aspiration is located]. Kamel [Hela] was doing the screen-printing for the Bati Company on the other side of the

building. It is when the screen-printing shifted out that we got these rooms adjoining the entrance.

Radhika left in 1985 and Christian and Michel soon after.



Abha and Radhika in the first years

Around 1988/89, the space became insufficient, we had by then 6 or 7 girls and not enough place to work, to store our [raw materials and finished goods]. We were bursting out of the place.

At that time I got pregnant (my daughter was born in May 1990), so it is only in 1991/1992 that we decided to shift and started looking for another place. The previous year, I was too preoccupied to look after the construction, it remains the status quo as Francois who was working with me, was not ready to undertake the job. When I joined again in early 1991, I started to look for a place. There was that tussle with *Aurofuture* not giving us land, a lot of heartache with the people living in the Industrial Zone not wanting a new unit.

Q: Why they did not want such a 'soft' industry?

AT: The meetings held at that time were very hard. One person even told me [in a meeting]: "We don't want you, flowers stink, we don't want you". It went to that extent [the person later on apologized]. They did not want their day to day established routine to be disturbed [by something new]. It was

basically the residents around Horizon [Community]. Of course Revelation [Community] did not want us near them.

Q: How did you find the money to build your new workshop?

AT: We had been saving since the end of the 1980's.



New Building in the Industrial Zone

Since it was clear since sometime that we had to shift, we had put some money aside, with the agreement of the Development Group [which was looking after planning at that time].

Q: Did you take any loan from the Bank?

AT: We had also a meeting at Verité [Community], with the residents of the Kottakarai area; it was quite unfriendly and unhelpful. There were some Auroville units already in the area. We were lucky that a piece of land near the CSR was up for sale. Someone helped us to broker a deal with the villager wanting to sell it. Because this land came up for sale, we were able to get this place, because none of the neighbouring communities were ready to help, neither was Auroville in general ready to help us. We finally bought the land through the Auroville Land Service. In between I had to threaten:

“As an Indian, I can buy the land in my own name anyway!” People felt so righteously indignant that I could say such a thing and not play the game! That is the past.

About borrowing money: we had kept some money aside, some 10 lakhs to buy the land and start the construction. It was not enough to finish. We took a loan from the commercial unit’s Revolving Fund which we refunded in about two years.

Q: You are celebrating 30 Years of Shradhanjali? What are your thoughts 30 years down the line?

AT: Well, 30 years ago, I certainly did not think that I would be at it 30 years later. What I feel most positive about is the change it has brought with the girls that we employ I mentioned the first girl 28 or 29 years ago and the girls that we now employ from the local area, I can see such a huge difference. It is a generational difference. It is very encouraging. The girls are more educated, individually more self-assured.

In terms of *raison d’être*, Shradhanjali has kept the same objectives, the same goals: to create beautiful things. I feel that it has become much more important to work harmoniously with the people that we employ, with the women. Over the years, I have become more and more convinced that the keys to a change the life in our area are in the hands of the women. Over the years, there has been a slight shift of attitude in me on how important this resource is, the women from the local village. I would like to spend more time training, training in the form of exposure. They should have another outlook than the male bastion which is the village setting. They should have more self-esteem, more self-value, larger horizons of thought, both in terms of social thought as well as in terms of outlook, education or environment. I want to concentrate on this.

Q: Do you want to grow big?

AT: It has always been an issue for me. I don't want to grow big at the cost of losing the handmade beauty, the handmade quality, an attention to each individual piece, but we can't remain at the same size without in a way going down or collapsing. The answer would 'yes, I want to grow', but not exponentially, in a phased organic manner.

Q: What is your vision for the next 30 years?

AT: Oh gosh! I don't want to be here for 30 more years. It should be taken by young people with enthusiasm and a different energy. The Vision would be to continue to work harmoniously with women and with the Nature.

Q: Auroville has changed tremendously in 30 years. How do you see Shradhanjali in this changing scenario? Is it easier today?

AT: I think that people who come now have no clue what we had to go through. Last week I went to a meeting for 'quality control' for Auroville products. Everybody in the meeting was relatively new to Auroville, the common complaint was that there is no infrastructure for new people to start: "there is no path for new entrepreneurs!" When I think back how it was, at that time one had to be a fighter to just survive. Today, everything is laid out, there are of course difficulties, 'matter' is difficult. But there is just no comparison in terms of material difficulty. But today as the life of the city is way more organized, people expect to come to a full-fledged Chamber of Commerce, with everything well-set and handed down, with buildings,

infrastructure and organizational help. People expect everything ready; it is a totally different ballgame.

Q: As a motto, you are using: "Life must blossom like a flower offering itself to the Divine". Tell us why did you choose this motto?

AT: This phrase of the Mother has always touched me. There is such a beauty and spontaneous offering in a flower or a tree, in nature in general. It is a life lesson for us who pretend to do the yoga of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Look at this flower in the garden [showing a rose]. Even in the most arid, hard conditions, it opens itself, it gives itself. This flower or a bush, a tree has no demands, it just gives itself. It is a very beautiful lesson for life, for the path to tread. And the analogy is appropriate since we work with flowers.

Q: Thank you