

From waste to water

Try to imagine a life without water. Just think of your morning routine: you drink water from your filter or tap, you flush your toilet, take a shower and brush your teeth. And that is just the water you directly consume. Water is woven into the fabric of your bedsheets, crucial in mining the materials for your bedside light bulb, and essential in growing and processing your morning coffee.

It is the resource that all life depends on. Your body is 60% water, and 71% of our planet's surface is covered by it. And it is the next global crisis. Scientists warn that overconsumption and pollution are rapidly depleting our freshwater supplies. Climate change compounds the threat, with an estimated 80% of the world's population, including most of India, facing significant water security risks.

Auroville is no exception. Situated on a sandstone plateau with no nearby river, it relies almost exclusively on groundwater. All of the township wells tap into aquifers that replenish solely through rainfall. These ground waters are the main source for domestic, industrial and irrigation requirements in Auroville and its bio-region, with declining water levels and ever deeper tube wells as a consequence. Despite Auroville's commendable efforts in reforestation and water management - including rainwater harvesting, check-dam construction, and outreach programmes for tank rehabilitation - the persistent degradation of groundwater continues unabated. The stark reality is that, in most places, water extraction outpaces natural recharge by a factor of twenty to one.

A wake-up call

The looming water crisis stems from a complex web of interconnected shortcomings in many areas of human civilisation. Our rapid march towards industrialisation and urban growth has resulted in unprecedented levels of water contamination. Industrial waste, agricultural chemicals, and untreated urban sewage infiltrate our precious freshwater resources at an alarming rate. Simultaneously, we are drawing from our underground water reserves at an unsustainable pace, depleting aquifers far more quickly than nature can replenish them.

Water is also how we will experience many of the impacts of climate change. From unpredictable precipitation patterns to increasing extreme weather events like droughts and floods, these issues are turning into a global crisis with devastating consequences. These overarching issues, compounded by additional factors like widespread deforestation, destruction of wetland ecosystems, and subpar water management strategies, are not only jeopardising our access to freshwater but also significantly degrading the quality of the water that remains available to us. This multifaceted crisis threatens not just our water security, but the very foundations of our ecosystems, economies, and societies.

In response to this looming crisis, Auroville held a Citizens Assembly in 2021/22 to develop a water vision for the community. A randomly selected group of residents heard diverse perspectives on water management and synthesised key elements into a comprehensive plan. The resulting vision emphasised recognising water's sacredness, using it as a unifying force, and creating a water-conscious society. The assembly also proposed over 50 actions, many focusing on water education.

Ribhu Vohra, from the Auroville unit WasteLess, participated in the Citizens Assembly. His experience of witnessing water scarcity firsthand in Cape Town in March 2018 reinforced the urgency of developing a freshwater curriculum. Ribhu and his co-Founder Chandrah had travelled to South Africa

for a conference, only to find themselves in the midst of a climate disaster. Cape Town was approaching Day Zero—the day when the city would run out of water. Consumption was rationed to a mere 50 litres per person per day. Residents queued at supermarkets before dawn for packaged drinking water, with supplies quickly depleting. As they prayed for rain, Ribhu and Chandrah realised they were witnessing the water future of Auroville and possibly all of India and Southeast Asia. They instantly knew that this crisis was no longer a distant threat, but knocking on their doors, demanding immediate action. It was time for WasteLess to act before the taps would run dry!

The idea of a water curriculum was not new; it has been part of WasteLess' vision since its founding in 2011. In fact, the organisation has always intended to address three major topics via its educational programmes: waste, energy and water. They believe that fostering societal awareness in classrooms about these omnipresent issues will lead to real change driven by the next generation, preserving our planet's environment. Waste was simply the first issue at hand as it was the most visually present.

After successfully launching 'Sea Change' in July 2023, an educational programme inspiring over 13,500 rural Tamil Nadu students to reduce marine plastic pollution, the WasteLess team decided it was time to shift focus from waste to water, tackling another critical environmental challenge.

The water curriculum

In August 2023, the WasteLess team embarked on developing a comprehensive freshwater curriculum. Drawing from their decade-long experience in education, they opted for a phased approach to ensure accuracy, quality, and impact. The initial phase focused on extensive research and analysis.

Chandrah and Ribhu recruited a team of Aurovilians with expertise in academic research and project management. Helen Eveleigh, with her vast background in research and policy advisory for governmental organisations and NGOs worldwide, took the lead in project development. The seven-member team delved deep into the subject, analysing over 100 research papers and interviewing 42 global stakeholders with diverse water-related expertise. This list includes names like Sandra Postel, the founding director of Global Water Policy Project and the receiver of the Stockholm Water Prize in 2021, often described as the Nobel Prize for Water, Rajendra Singh, known as the 'Waterman of India' and founder of the NGO Tarun Bharat Sangh (also a Stockholm Water Prize recipient), as well as Ravi Agarwal, activist, artist and founder of the NGO Toxic Links and the Shyama Foundation. The team also conducted interviews with nine water experts from Auroville, including farmers, wastewater and freshwater managers, an urban designer and a geologist. This resulted in an immense amount of rich data.

Identifying key challenges and solutions

Through meticulous analysis and coding of this information, the team identified 52 recurring challenges and 47 potential solutions mentioned in research papers and interviews. The three top challenges that emerged were pollution and water quality, climate change and freshwater scarcity, highlighting the complex interconnectedness of the larger issue at hand. The population that will be affected the most by these issues in the very near future are people who live in urban India.

When it came to global solutions for overcoming the freshwater crisis, improved management, governance, and policy were cited as the most effective approaches, followed closely by education and awareness initiatives.



The fact that 35 people or papers mentioned education as an effective solution to the emerging water crisis gave the WasteLess team the final surety that they were on the right track. And with urban Indians as the population mostly affected, it was clearly necessary to develop an educational programme in India for India.

During their research, WasteLess discovered a fascinating insight from scientists and water experts: the importance of building an emotional and personal connection with freshwater. The experts highlighted the profound disconnect between humans and the very resource that sustains us. People often treat water as a mere commodity, exploiting, wasting, and polluting it without recognising its true value. Mridula Ramesh, author of Watershed: How We Destroy India's Water and How We Can Save It, emphasised this point, stating, "Start with respecting water. Everything else is just going to be symptomatic treatment. And it will always be." Rajendra Singh, the 'Waterman of India', expressed the same in conversation with WasteLess: "We are moving toward disaster because we are not loving to water. We are not giving respect to water. [...] This is the crisis."

Another key theme that emerged across interviews was the potential to develop a curriculum that bridges global challenges with local solutions. This approach would connect global issues like climate change, pollution, and the changing water cycle with local solutions, like traditional local water wisdom and history. By interweaving these two dimensions, the curriculum could demonstrate how small, local actions can address global issues, empowering students with the knowledge that they can make a real difference for our planet.

Interestingly these two aspects – valuing water and bridging global and local dimensions of the water crisis – align closely with the vision set forth by the 2021/22 Citizen Assembly. Their goal to "create a water-conscious society by integrating local and global wisdom and acting boldly with openness toward new possibilities" encapsulates this holistic approach.

In an educational context, these key aspects would translate into equipping and encouraging students to explore their local water situation, both at a personal and community level, while identifying opportunities for effective action. The curriculum would aim to build an emotional connection to water through engaging activities that provoke curiosity, interest, hope, and joy. Furthermore, the educational material should inspire students through stories of everyday people who transformed into water superheroes, teaching them how issues are identified, problems are overcome, and change in communities can happen.

To conclude the research phase, the

WasteLess water team, guided by Manas Chakrabarti, filtered through all the research and personal reflections to define the goal of the water curriculum. The research phase concluded with a powerful working goal: "Inspire future generations to become water superheroes, caring stewards of our planet's most valuable resource by empowering them to take action for a world with healthy water for all."

Developing a prototype

With the aim and valuable key elements clearly outlined, WasteLess is moving into the next phase of developing a prototype of the curriculum involving several schools in Tamil Nadu. The team will host participatory design sessions with selected groups of students and teachers alike to get initial feedback on larger concepts for the freshwater curriculum, exploring interest and areas of curiosity and researching innovative means of content delivery. Based on the gathered insights, WasteLess will create a pilot version of the curriculum which will include larger theoretical concepts, hands-on classroom activities as well as home and community-based initiatives, to inspire and empower the students. This pilot programme will then be tested extensively with data collected and analysed in order to adapt the content for maximum impact. Here WasteLess will team up with several schools to collect representative data of their target group.

As WasteLess embarks on the next phase of their journey to develop an innovative freshwater curriculum, they now invite the global Auroville community to join their mission. The team is actively seeking inspiring examples of action-based educational materials addressing the freshwater crisis, as well as stories of water superheroes making a difference in communities worldwide. If you come across beautiful action-based educational material on fresh water, know about a water superhero in your community, or if you are one yourself, please get in touch with WasteLess by sending a mail to info@wastelessindia.org. The team would be grateful to receive inspiring input from communities all over the world.

As we face the looming global water crisis, WasteLess believes that we all hold the power to create a world with healthy water for all living beings. The journey towards water consciousness can begin today, with each one of us taking small steps by being grateful when we turn on our tap, realising its magic that sustains our bodies and valuing its worth for our planet. Together, we can turn the tide on the global freshwater crisis, ensuring that this life-giving resource is protected and cherished for generations to come.

by Luise Pape for WasteLess

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Clarifying misconceptions: a response to recent statements about Auroville's governance

In light of an interview published in Auroville Today's October issue that presented a perspective on Auroville's current governance situation, we feel it necessary to offer a different view that more accurately reflects the experiences and concerns of many in our community. While we respect everyone's right to their perspective, it is crucial that we maintain clarity about the facts surrounding our current situation.

What does it mean to honour the Mother's Dream?

Auroville has always been a place of diverse opinions and approaches to manifesting the Mother's vision. This diversity is our strength, but it also requires us to be vigilant in maintaining open, transparent, and inclusive processes for decision-making and governance. Recent events have challenged these foundational principles of our community.

First and foremost, we must distinguish between the Mother's spiritual vision for Auroville and specific development plans. The Mother's dream of human unity and constant progress is eternal and evolving. It requires us to adapt our approach as we grow and learn, always striving to embody the highest ideals of our community. Plans fixed decades ago should not be confused with this living, breathing vision.

Moreover, we must remember that the Auroville Foundation Act of 1988 was created to protect and encourage the development of Auroville, and ensure that the residents can manage their own daily affairs. The current actions of the Auroville Foundation Office (AVFO) deviate significantly from the spirit of 'free and fair' collaborative governance.

When dialogue becomes a one-way street

There have been claims that the AVFO and its appointed working groups have made efforts at dialogue and consultation. However, the reality we have experienced tells a different story. Legitimate community decision-making processes, including Residents' Assembly Decisions, have been repeatedly ignored or overridden. A stark example of this is the AVFO's refusal to acknowledge the Residents' Assembly Decision of May 10, 2022, regarding the composition of the Working Committee. This decision, made with the participation of nearly 900 community members was summarily dismissed without any genuine attempt at dialogue or compromise. All other Residents'

Assembly decisions were also ignored, even though they had the highest community participation in Auroville's history.

This stands in stark contrast to our long-standing traditions of collaborative governance. Yes, our processes have been slow, often frustrating, and are still evolving. But to claim that "so many were excluded" is a serious accusation. All efforts are made to reach out through multiple channels, in multiple languages to include the full community in processes of participatory governance.

It's important to clarify that opposition to recent AVFO actions has been largely peaceful and grounded in our community's values. And yet Aurovilians expressing disagreement with the bulldozing of our community processes and values have faced threats to their livelihoods, visa issues, and even attempts at criminal prosecution. Over 200 Auroville residents have had their maintenances (stipends) cut and over 200 have been impacted by visa issues, with some long-term residents facing potential deportation. In two particularly troubling cases, an Auroville-born resident and a long-term resident also received a "Leave India Notice", and were expelled from the country. They still do not have an Entry visa to return, and several other Aurovilians are also stuck abroad.

These actions are unprecedented in our history and have created a climate of fear that is antithetical to Auroville's principles.

Our last resort to protect Auroville

The decision to seek legal recourse was not taken lightly. It came only after repeated attempts at dialogue were met with dismissal or silence. Even when courts have ruled in favour of maintaining Auroville's established processes, these judgments have often been disregarded by the AVFO. A prime example is the Madras High Court ruling of August 2022, which emphasised the need for mutuality and collaboration between the three 'authorities' of the Auroville Foundation, namely the Governing Board, International Advisory Council and the Residents' Assembly. This ruling was largely ignored and then appealed in the Madras High Court, with the AVFO continuing to make unilateral decisions without community consultation.

This pattern of behaviour has left many feeling that legal action is the only remaining avenue to protect the fundamental principles of our community. Moreover, attempts to criminalise dissent within our community and

threats of deportation have been used as a means of control. These actions strike at the very heart of what Auroville represents – a place of peace, freedom, experimentation, and collective growth.

Bulldozing our past, present and future

Regarding the implementation of development projects like the Crown Road, we too understand the importance and necessity of change. Aurovilians have always been committed to manifesting the city the Mother envisioned. However, this should be done in a way that respects our environmental commitments, involves genuine community consultation, and aligns with our values and best practices of sustainable and experimental living.

The recent forceful actions, carried out without proper environmental assessments or community input, do not align with these principles. For instance, the clearing of the Crown Road path has resulted in the felling of thousands of trees, many of which were part of Auroville's carefully nurtured forests. This action was taken despite a stay order from the National Green Tribunal, bypassing proper environmental impact assessments. We're not saying that there should be no tree cutting: but it has to be carefully considered in light of larger environmental considerations. Manifesting the Dream cannot happen at the expense of the natural and cultural landscapes of the bioregion.

The AVFO has claimed to engage in dialogue about these development plans. However, true dialogue involves not just speaking, but also listening and being willing to adjust plans based on input received. Unfortunately, what we have witnessed has been more akin to a one-sided lecture, with community concerns and alternative proposals consistently dismissed or ignored.

Land is our sacred body

We are also deeply concerned about the lack of transparency in recent land exchanges. These deals, involving land that was acquired through decades of community effort and donations from supporters worldwide, have been conducted without proper consultation or clear justification. The undervaluation of Auroville lands in these exchanges raises serious questions about financial stewardship and respect for the contributions of those who have supported Auroville's growth. In some cases, these lands were directly purchased and named by the

Mother for the purpose of building Auroville. Disposing of them in a haphazard manner is an insult to her Dream.

Our analysis suggests that these land exchanges have resulted in a financial loss to Auroville exceeding 240 crore rupees (28 million US dollars). In one particularly egregious case, a portion of AuroOrchard, a farm established with the Mother's blessings, was exchanged at less than 1% of its market value. This not only represents a significant financial loss but also disregards the historical and spiritual significance of the land, and raises questions as to who is really benefiting from these deals.

These land exchanges are just one aspect of a broader pattern of financial mismanagement that deeply concerns us. We've witnessed the takeover of community-generated and managed funds and assets, with decisions about their use being made without transparency or accountability. This lack of financial oversight puts at risk the resources that have been carefully stewarded by the community for decades.

Finding our way back to unity

In conclusion, we believe that the vision of Auroville born through the Mother and nurtured by so many is best served through open, transparent, and collaborative processes that respect the input of all community members. The current crisis presents us with an opportunity to recommit to these foundational principles.

We call upon all parties to return to the table in a spirit of genuine dialogue and mutual respect. Let us work together to find a way forward that honours our shared commitment to human unity and progress, while respecting the diverse perspectives within our community. No matter how long one has been in Auroville, or how far one has walked on the path of self-discovery, we believe that everyone who has chosen to join the community with a sincere aspiration has a voice and part to play. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular.

Auroville has always been an experiment in consciousness and human potential. Now, more than ever, we are called to embody the highest ideals of this experiment. We trust that through sincere effort and goodwill, we can overcome our current challenges and emerge stronger, more united, and better equipped to manifest the dream that brought us all here.

In service to Auroville,
The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly (Aravinda, Bharathy, Chali, Maël (TOS), Matthieu, Prashant, Valli)

REFLECTION

The absence of doubt

I would like to suggest that one of the main problems we are facing at present is that we 'know' too much. Or, rather, we think we know.

For at the moment there are a number of different narratives, each of which claim to tell the truth about what has gone wrong in Auroville. Perhaps the most prominent ones are that the foresters don't want the city, and that Auroville is being run by a small clique for whom money and economic efficiency, or a 'purist' manifestation of the Galaxy plan, are the most important considerations, and not the people who live here.

Over time, each of these narratives seems to have acquired a harder and harder shell as its chief propagators become more fervent and fixed in their belief that their's is the only true explanation of the problem, and what needs to be done about it. And every time they have to defend it against someone who thinks differently, or they have to cope with information which challenges it, instead of stepping back to consider if there is anything new they can learn, they tend to dig in deeper. In this way, they add another layer to the hard shell of their particular narrative while becoming more deeply and inextricably

identified with it.

Typically, these narratives are reductionist. They tend to reduce the complexity of the present situation to stark black and white choices, to a flat, two-dimensional landscape – "you are for the city or against the city", "you are for Mother's Auroville or against it" – or to the absence of alternatives: "we had no choice, we had to cut their maintenances", or "we had no choice, we had to go to court".

I do not doubt the sincerity of some who hold these positions; they believe that the integrity and future of Auroville is at stake and that they must fight to uphold it. What concerns me is the seeming absence of doubt. For the one thing that never seems to be expressed by the most fervent propagators of these different narratives is, "We don't know. We don't understand what is really happening in Auroville at present or what we should do about it."

This is somewhat surprising. Both Sri Aurobindo and Mother made it abundantly clear that humanity's knowledge of reality is, to put it mildly, defective; that what we term reality has far more dimensions than we are aware of, and, therefore, that our interpretation of what is happening to us and around us is necessarily

extremely partial, flawed.

Yet, some of us act as if we are immune to this disability. Perhaps at one time this overweening confidence in our own ability had its advantages. After all, you can't create a city and a forest from scratch unless you have a certain measure of belief in oneself as well, of course, as belief in Mother's vision.

And, of course, we also claim that Mother's words are there for our guidance, so how can we go wrong? However, we don't always pay that much attention to them, and even when we do, we tend to interpret her words in ways which suit our predisposition, or cherry-pick them to suit the narrative we have adopted, while ignoring her warning that her statements should not become dogma. For she was always on the crest of the evolutionary wave which, as she once observed, is recreating the universe moment by moment.

Wouldn't it be wiser, therefore, for us to admit that none of us hold an absolute monopoly on truth, and that while we may grasp fragments, none of us can grasp the whole or follow the movement of that evergrowing wave?

Actually, I think we do understand this, which is why some are making genuine attempts

at collaboration, reaching across the battle lines, because they realise that everybody may have something important to contribute to our overall knowledge and to the way forward. And yet, it is rare to hear anybody who is on the barricades admit to doubt or to a lack of knowledge concerning what is really going on.

Why? Is it because in the heat of action we become so desperate to win, or not to lose, that we get caught up in a zero-sum game? Have some of us have invested so much energy in creating and supporting a particular narrative that we don't want to admit that we may have got it wrong? Or have some of us welded ourselves so tightly to a particular narrative that it has become part of our identity and therefore must be defended at all costs?

But doubt, and the admission of ignorance, might be the first crack in the hard shell of our narratives which would allow the infinite Grace and the moment by moment guidance which is always available to us to pour in.

Moreover, the collective willingness to admit to our essential ignorance may be the one thing that could unify us at present, and allow us to encounter each other again as limited but aspiring individuals rather than merely one-dimensional representatives of a particular narrative.

Alan

Jothi's Journey: A Conversation on Life, Challenges, and Auroville

Jothi was born in 1964 in Kuilapalayam. He joined Auroville by himself at a young age and has contributed in numerous ways, through service, education and sports, while battling long-term health challenges.

AV Today: How did your path lead you to Auroville?

Jothi: My early schooling was in the local government school in Kuilapalayam. Our maths teacher used to cane us. One time, he called us up for making a mistake, and he went down the line hitting everyone. When it was my turn, I had to place my hand on the table. Just as he swung the cane down to hit, I pulled my hand away, and he missed. He was so angry that he punched me instead. I was about eight years old at the time. I went home that day, sick from the shock and pain, and I didn't go back to school the next day. My parents must have spoken to the teacher because he came to check on me and apologised.

After that, I started avoiding school. The headmaster would send older students to search for us, but after the incident with the maths teacher, no search parties came for me and I enjoyed playing in the tamarind grove.

How did you first get involved with Auroville?

It was around the time I stopped going to school. In those days, Auroville was just starting to grow, and a new school was being set up in Aspiration. John's cow shed - near where the bakery is now - was converted into a Montessori-style school and run by Narayan, Bhavana and a couple of others. As I was playing on a tree nearby, one day Narayan approached me with sweets.

At first, I refused. We were told not to accept anything from outsiders for fear of being kidnapped. But eventually the sweets were too tempting and I accepted. After a few days of this, I was taken into the school, and I liked it. There were sandboxes with toys for us to play with and tell stories.

Some months later, Varadharajan, who was entrusted by The Mother for the integration of local people into Auroville, took me and a few others to meet the Mother. She blessed us. That was a significant moment in my life. After that, I was enrolled in Auroville's main school at Aspiration, and my journey with the community began.

We'd assemble at the Sanskrit school in the morning, chant shlokas and after the announcements, head out to our class at Last School or Pyramids. There were no grades or exams, learning was enjoyable. My favourite class at that time was the General Knowledge class run by Michael red beard.

But after some time, conflicts arose in Auroville, and the schools were shut down. For about 10 years (1974 – 1984), there was no formal schooling and we had to find ways to continue learning on our own. During this time, I stayed in Aspiration with a group of other kids. We did a lot of activities together — playing sports, exploring the land, going to the beach and finding ways to keep ourselves engaged.

One day some of us Tamil kids went to explore the Toujours Mieux workshop managed by Jean. They had many different machines that fascinated us there. We asked Jean if we could learn to work with the machines and he replied that we had to know maths first. I said, "Teach us maths." He started right away, first on the floor, then on a black board. After a few days, Jean found us an abandoned hut at Utility where we continued our maths lessons.

Croquette was also teaching Sukhi's (Martine) adopted Korean son, Dylan, at home. Rose, Martha and others were there too. I joined them for some time. In the afternoons we'd go to Ami where Gordon and Jeanne taught English.

As life was still difficult in Aspiration, some of us were taken into Aurelec where they had begun to make computers. We soldered the components onto the PCBs to make connecting cables for the computers. I was paid Rs. 300 as a monthly salary: I gave half to Aspiration

community as my contribution. We asked Ulli to let us work in testing. He said we needed to know electronics for that. We said help teach us electronics and he engaged an engineer to teach us for an hour before work. At this time, the Sanskrit school was being run as a guest house to help the community. We asked Sam, who was managing it, to allow us to use the library room for an hour for our electronics lessons.

During one tea break at Aurelec, Fred came to talk to us about starting the school. We agreed, and invited kids and adults to join. About 50 children and 10 teachers showed up at Sanskrit school and our education system was gradually rebuilt.

You chose to move to Auroville at an early age. What was that experience like?

It was difficult. Around the age of 14, I was going back and forth between Auroville and my family in the village. My heart was in Aspiration, but with my family close by, they expected me to be involved in their family functions and support them. It was hard to balance both.

I remember one day, Renu — we were all young then in Aspiration — said something that stuck with me. She told me, "You eat here at Aspiration, and then you go back home to the village and eat there too. You have to decide if you want to be in Auroville or in the village." I thought a lot about that. At that time, I wasn't thinking about Auroville's ideas or philosophy — I was just a kid. But eventually, I decided to commit fully to the Auroville community. I cut my connection with my family. Auroville became my home, and the people here became my brothers and sisters.

At some point when I was still very young, I had a strange and intense experience one morning that stayed with me for years. I'm not sure if it was a dream or something else, but it felt incredibly real. In this experience, I was standing in front of Sri Aurobindo, who had passed away long before I was born. I vividly saw him laid out on the ground floor next to a staircase, with a long white beard and hair, covered in a silvery or golden robe up to his chest. The experience was so real that it affected me deeply. I couldn't understand how I could have seen someone from a time before I existed.

Later, I shared this experience with Kireet Joshi. His interpretation gave me some comfort. Over time, I accepted the experience for what it was — dream, memory, or something else.

After those early experiences, what path did your education take?

After Auroville's school restarted, I continued for two years, then I had a chance to study in the US. Gordon and Jean, who were connected to Auroville, selected three of us for a project to study abroad. I attended Northfield Mount Hermon, a private prep school in Massachusetts.

How did you adjust?

It was a massive culture shock. When I first arrived in New York, I was overwhelmed by the crowds, the cars and how busy everything was. I had this idea of America as the Wild West, with cowboys and open land - I used to read a lot of westerns - but instead I found myself in the middle of a bustling city with skyscrapers. School was also different — everything was well-organised with students from all over the world. The academic system was more structured. I was a bit older than the other students in my grade, but I adjusted over time. I learned a lot during those two years.

After returning to Auroville, how did your life evolve?

After coming back, Diane approached me asking if I wanted to manage Auropress, a printing press that had been taken over from Barun. I told her I did not know anything about printing or management. She took me to Auropress, introduced the workers to me and explained briefly how things functioned.

The same evening, she handed me the keys to Auropress saying that I needed to open it in the morning by 8 am and then she was gone. I think it was a few days earlier when, overnight, all the books and tapes of the Mothers *Agenda* were taken away from Auroville to an undisclosed place and many people (especially French) left Auroville disappointed that the Mother's *Agendas* were no more in Auroville.

It was not easy to deal with the few workers at Auropress. Their needs were always increasing, but the income was not. So, after a year and half, I handed the responsibility over to Claude Arpi and took a break to travel to North India.

Coming back to Auroville I realised I still wanted to continue my education, but I wasn't sure how to proceed at first. Eventually, I came across a newspaper ad from Annamalai University, offering a distance learning programme, and I decided to go for it. I enrolled in psychology, which fascinated me because it connected with my interest in understanding people and human behaviour. I studied for three years while also starting to work in Aurofuture at Bharat Nivas. At Aurofuture, I learned drafting, model-making, and computer-aided design. I also got involved in digitising the land records and survey drawings and doing 3D modelling, and worked on some projects with Roger and Luigi. Those were exciting times as Auroville was developing, and we were contributing to the vision of what the community could become.

How did your health issues begin, and how have they affected your life?

My health challenges started in the summer of 1988, when I was living in Saylam. I developed kidney problems. I was very active, spending hours playing basketball and other sports and I was not drinking enough water because the slow-dripping candle water filter was always empty by the time I got back home.

One day, during a basketball match in Pondy, I started having a severe headache. The next day I went to the Health Centre. The doctor asked me to give urine and blood samples. The result showed I had kidney problems. After four months of medication and tests, I finally ended up in the East Coast Hospital dialysis centre for a week. I was very unhappy there. Then Luigi took me to Chennai where I ended up having a kidney transplant.

Two and half years later, the graft failed and I began dialysis. This has continued for the past 22 years. It hasn't been easy, but I didn't let it stop me. I kept working, contributing to Auroville, and coaching basketball. Whenever I travelled for the National tournaments, I pre-arranged my dialysis sessions so I wouldn't miss coaching.

How did you get into coaching?

During the years when school sports was at Certitude, there was a need for trained coaches to help run the programme. I opted to get trained as a basketball coach in the NIS program under SAI.

The first time I was engaged to coach the Puducherry State basketball team was in 1996 when the Youth National Championship was being held in Pondy for the first time. Thereafter, I coached the state teams regularly for the National and South Zone Championships in various categories until 2016. Every time I saw a child I coached improve, not just as an athlete but as an individual, it was very rewarding, and reinforced my belief that I was still capable of contributing positively.

Managing a chronic health condition must be challenging. How did it affect you on a personal level?

When I first began dealing with my kidney issues and the subsequent need for dialysis, it was overwhelming. There were days when the treatments left me physically drained, and the uncertainty of my condition weighed heavily on my mind. I often felt isolated, especially since I couldn't participate in activities as freely as I once did. It was hard when some friends treated



me differently after I got sick. They didn't know how to act around me, and some distanced themselves. It hurt, but over time, I learned to accept it and not take it personally. I found strength in those who stayed by my side.

In the year 2000, I felt very unhappy and unhealthy, both emotionally and psychologically, because I was told by my doctor not to continue playing basketball as I may accidentally get hit on the graft. Being home unable to do anything was suffocating. One day, a small group of friends came to my place to do something to improve my situation. That's when I thought of becoming a sports organiser and we started the Auroville sports coordination team. This led to the creation of AVSRC in 2007 and I got actively involved in its management and organising sports and cultural activities in Auroville and the villages around. I also resumed coaching basketball and improving the sports infrastructure at the New Creation Sports ground. Staying active, especially with coaching basketball that I'm very passionate about, really helped. It gave me something to focus on and a way to stay connected with the community. A year ago, I had heart trouble and ended up with three stents. That slowed me down a lot. I had to stop coaching, and I'm not sure how much I can handle now. Over the years, I've also had road accidents. This limits my physical activity and movements, but I still try to stay engaged in other ways.

You've been part of Auroville for so long. How has the community changed over the years, and how have you contributed to its growth?

In the early days, we were focused on building infrastructure and a sense of community. I took on various roles. I was part of the first Working Committee then the Auroville Council and later the Entry Group. But after some time, I realised that politics wasn't for me. It was draining and emotionally exhausting, so I decided to step back.

Have the present conflicts affected your relationships?

Unfortunately, yes. Some close friends and I have grown apart over disagreements. It's hard to see people you've known for years become distant over differences in opinion. That's another reason I stay away from politics.

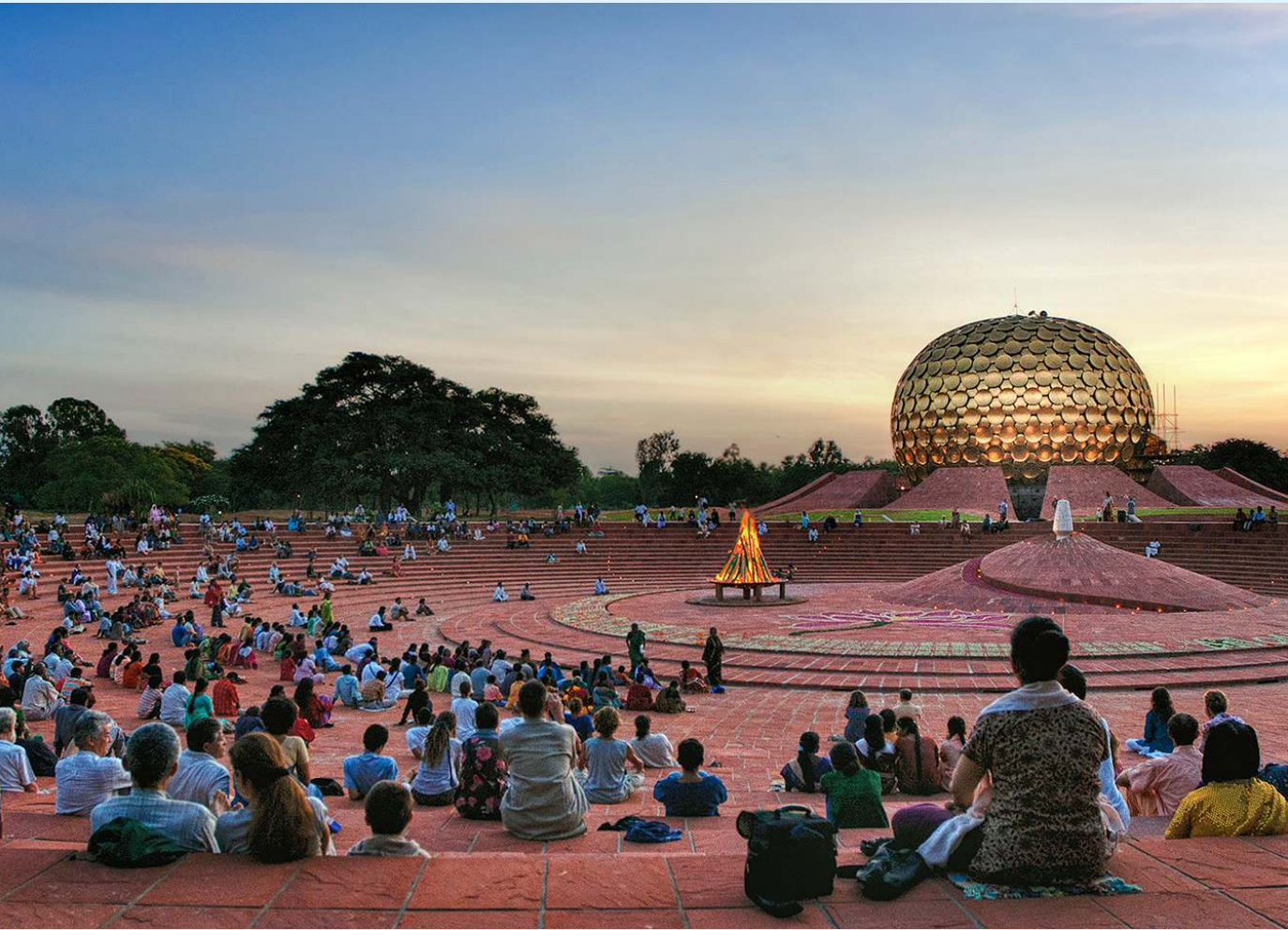
How do you envision Auroville's future?

Auroville's future lies with the younger generation. They'll take the foundation we've built and hopefully, shape it according to "Their Vision". However, the core values of unity, diversity, and collaboration should remain at the forefront. So, I'm optimistic The Mother's dream will come to be.

For me, Auroville has been a lifelong commitment. I chose this community over my traditional village ties because I believed in what it stands for. Auroville has given me so much — a sense of belonging, a purpose, and a community that stands for something greater. Auroville is more than just a place to live; it's a commitment to a vision. And I'm proud to be part of this journey.

In conversation with Chandra

John Mandeere



's photography



John Mandein, who passed away recently, was one of the early Auroville Today photographers and designed the cover of its first compilation.

Born in Minnesota, John grew up on the beautiful California coast in Pacific Grove near Monterey. On September 19, 1968 at age 24, he came to India with a one-way ticket from Los Angeles to Kolkata and within a month through a series of almost “orchestrated” events, ended up in Pondicherry at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where Mother accepted him as an Ashramite.

John helped set up the first silk-screen print workshop in the Ashram Press, where he designed and printed book covers, greeting cards, letterheads, visiting cards and posters. He had no formal training in art but enjoyed making intricate and complex line drawings with ink. He took up photography in the late 1970s and got seriously into it in the 1980s, among other things extensively documenting Auroville in all its aspects. From 1988 he was part of the Prisma team which did all the publicity work for Aurelec, and many of the Prisma publications include his photos.

In 1994 he took photos for the first Auroville exhibition at the Visitors Centre. He also taught photography to many Auroville children, some of whom ended up becoming photographers themselves. Recently he had been working with the Ashram Archives on a new book they are bringing out.

As a photographer, John was a perfectionist and a classicist. Like the great classical photographers, John did his own processing and printing, and his work was dominated by superb lighting (he only worked with natural light), fidelity, exposure and great compositions. A selection of his work can be viewed at mandein.in

What farming could become

Anshul joined Auroville in 2019 and works at AuroOrchard. His journey with farming started in Auroville ten years ago with his intention to grow his own food. In recent years he has been working on a vision for an 'integral agriculture', researching the different dimensions and relationships of food, soil, humanity and the growth of consciousness. He engages with schools of Auroville and the volunteers at AuroOrchard to understand the future of agriculture and the agriculture of the future.

Auroville Today: Did you always want to be a farmer?

Anshul: No. I studied engineering at college but I was an 'accidental' engineer because after I finished school I was completely clueless about what I wanted to study, and there were few alternatives in those days.

After college, I worked in a school in Ahmedabad for four years, helping run a programme called 'Design for Change' which developed programmes for children to design their own learning process. It was a whole new world for me, it gave me a new perspective, but I was not finding it complete in some way. That's when I first visited Auroville.

I thought, how could Mother have such a dream? Is it possible? If so, why isn't the entire world here? I wanted to see how it actually worked, so I began helping in the Sacred Groves project. This was a wake-up call because I realised that even after 24 years of education I knew nothing, absolutely nothing. I didn't know how to build a house or grow my own food, my cooking was very basic...

That got me thinking that I had to make major shift in my life. I had just met my future wife, and we decided that the first thing we had to learn was how to grow our own food. That was the start of the journey.

But you didn't pursue it in Auroville at that time?

No. We left Auroville for various reasons at that time and, after attending a Permaculture Design Course, started farming in Kodaikanal. For three years we worked as permaculture designers and farmers for a client there. Though permaculture added something to my knowledge of design, something still felt missing. The approach seemed very westernised to me, and I didn't feel it made sense to the local farmers. That's when I started thinking about the wisdom of the ancients and the indigenous peoples.

If you study the culture which is coming from the Vedic societies in India or other old agricultural societies across the world you see that they had some profound understanding of who they were and of their connection to the universe. For instance, the native peoples of the Americas don't think in the way that we do, their perception of the world is entirely different. They view plants and animals as part of themselves, and see land as sacred rather than a commodity. This perception was created by the context that they were in, by the agricultural society in which they lived, and through which they were connected with each other and with the land.

To explore this further, life took us to Himachal Pradesh where we rented a piece of



three times a week, we had a market where we were selling our pickles and jams, and we were running courses. From six in the morning till six at night we were busy running the farm and our house with very little social support.

But there have been examples of indigenous communities or ones close to the soil which have destroyed the land around them. So this connection to the soil doesn't seem to necessarily lead to a sense of oneness with the environment.

Agreed. There is a very good book by David Montgomery, called *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, in which he talks about how civilisations like the Greeks and those of South America reached a certain peak of prosperity, which was also the peak of their agriculture. However, because of greed and the desire for power they destroyed their ecology, and as soon as agriculture declined their civilisation started waning.

Also, indigenous communities require the individual to be subsumed in the collective, which is not productive of individual freedom or consciousness development.

Yes, and this is why the solution is not to go back. For the sustainability of humanity we need new cultural and social paradigms where we can realise our highest potentials both as individuals and as a collective. Moreover, these indigenous cultures are not sustainable in our rapidly changing world. We stayed with an indigenous community in Colombia: in regard to the spiritual wisdom of indigenous communities, these people were at the top. However, now they are under the threat of being wiped out as a culture with pressure from the drug cartels to grow coca, and from humanitarian organisations that want to 'help' them by modernising their diets and lifestyle. Moreover, their new generation is not as connected to the land and the culture and aspire to leave. So I don't see how the present situation can be sustained. It needs an evolution which takes into account the reality of our capitalist world and the need to imagine alternative futures.

On a more practical side, farming is very physically demanding. We need people to farm despite all the technological advances, for we are not at a stage where farming can be completely mechanised (at least not in countries like India), and, anyway, mechanisation has its own drawbacks. So an important question is, who is going to do the backbreaking work? For the children of Indian farmers also no longer want to work on the land and the new farmers may not have the skills or the endurance to do this work for years.

So what is the solution?

I don't know. I used to believe in breakthroughs, in something that would change the world, like Covid. That didn't happen. And then I realised what we are talking about can only come about with a change of consciousness, a new worldview altogether, and that won't happen overnight.

In terms of my personal development, however, what I felt I had been missing I found in Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's explanation of the evolution of consciousness. For They were talking about the need for present humanity to evolve, to become more than human: to become divine. This made the picture much more complete for me.

But then I wondered, what is the connection of consciousness development with agriculture? And I began to realise that agriculture could be more than just about saving the soil or reducing the atmospheric carbon. Farming could become a way of learning more about myself, of developing myself, and of bringing the evolving consciousness which Sri Aurobindo and The Mother spoke about into my work. In this way, agriculture could become more integral for me: farming could become my yoga.

But how can farming be conducive to consciousness development?

In the modern world, our being has become severed from nature and there is an urgent need



Harvesting at Auro Orchard

for reintegration. By allowing me to work with the soil, farming helps me to ground myself. It teaches me the patterns of nature, and that we are part of that pattern, and so I discover my place in the universe not only as a human being, but also as an evolving being, for I can see that nature evolves all the time.

What I mean is that agriculture, in its truest sense, is more than the cultivation of food. It can prepare individuals for communion with nature, for learning about cosmic forces and, therefore, themselves: in this perspective, the soil is cultivated as a means of cultivating the soul.

So I think any journey of self-discovery would be incomplete without us putting our hands in the soil, or planting a seed and watching something grow, because all of this can teach us so much.

But I'm cautious of talking about the idea of consciousness in agriculture because I don't want it to become a dogma or new age jargon. If I am using it as a means of transforming my own consciousness, it's not necessary that people who are working with me should know what I am doing, and if working with soil offers these possibilities, this need not be pointed out all the time to others.

But this journey of self-discovery cannot happen in a three-hour farming package course because no deep connections can be created in that time. It's a long-term process. It means you have to be on the land, every day, to the point of boredom. And then you have to cross that point for it to start to become something different.

I don't believe that everybody has to become a farmer to learn about this, but farms could become schools. If the farms became schools and children are learning and growing up on farms, they will go on to do whatever they wish to pursue, but they will do it from a deep sense of connection with themselves and with the environment. In this way, if we are talking about how someone can become more integral in their consciousness, I think agriculture has great potential.

Have you tried to offer this experience in Auroville?

Yes, I offered a one-year course at AuroOrchard to Aurovillian students. I planned to work alongside them on the land, and also to teach them about the various aspects and dimensions of farming. One student signed up and it was great. It was the longest course I had ever run and she was completely new to agriculture.

By the end of it, I could see a transformation in her. She had been very shy and unsure about herself at the beginning, and because she found a place where she could develop into something on her own, she became a very different person. I don't want to ascribe this just to agriculture, I'm not saying nothing else can do this, but I think it provides a great opportunity for our children to learn about things which are important for understanding who they are and what they want out of life.

It's also important that people feel they're

in a place where they can give something. Moreover, the work with the land is inherently healing because you are dealing with creation. We have a lot of volunteers on the farm, and each comes with their own issues and traumas And I see how working with the land and connecting with others who share this work changes them.

That's also the power, for them to feel that if they plan something it comes to something. This is especially important for young people, many of whom feel they have a bleak future, because it allows them to feel they can participate in the life forces in some way.

Do you think that farming as it is done in Auroville at present is promoting this kind of personal growth?

Sometimes I feel embarrassed by the kind of farming that we are doing here. If I can grow 100 kilos of something for the Solar Kitchen that is worthwhile, but can't I contribute something more to the dream of Auroville? As Auroville is a beacon for a new kind of world, I feel that farming here should be offering something more. Can it be a space for self-reflection, critical thinking? Can it be a tool for the transformation of consciousness? Can it offer a new kind of education?

However, I'm not trying to hold the higher moral ground, because the hard truth is that our farmers are struggling. We cannot offer them a good livelihood and many are in debt, so how can we expect them to try for something more? Even before we talk about consciousness development or teaching the children on our farms, the farmers themselves have to be supported, and Auroville is not doing that at present.

Why is this? Perhaps, after all, we don't want farms in Auroville. If so, let's look at the alternatives. But let's at least begin a conversation about this.

You paint a pessimistic picture, not only about farming in Auroville but farming elsewhere. If there are fewer and fewer farmers because their children don't want to take up this work, it sounds as if the future of farming will be mechanised. And then where would be the possibility for using agriculture as a means for the growth of consciousness?

However, I don't think the future is so bleak. Many people are working on this issue around the world, and many people are interested and concerned about it. At least, that is the first step. What happens next depends on all of us collectively. And even if in 20 or 30 years we are all eating everything out of packets or popping food pills, I think it may be part of a longer-term process, and perhaps we have to go through that to realise that something else is more important. I have given up the idea that a dramatic change for good will happen in my lifetime, but we still have to do the work so that it can happen, because we are responsible to future generations for what we are doing today.

From an interview by Alan

Diversity in Expression

a collective exhibition hosted by the Tibetan Pavilion,

Walking into the room of this exhibition curated by Art Service and CREEVA feels like stepping into a conversation in multiple languages — some loud and vibrant, others quiet and subtle. This exhibition gathers an eclectic mix of artworks that embrace a wide range of techniques, styles, and moods, offering viewers a sensory experience that is complex and inviting. At first glance, the variety might seem overwhelming, yet the exhibition manages to weave these distinct voices into a form of artistic co-existence.

The textures in the room catch your attention immediately — thick layers of paint in some pieces seem to ripple off the canvas, while other works are so delicate they almost dissolve into the walls. One artist experiments with mixed media, combining torn papers with acrylics, creating a tactile patchwork of memory. Another offers introspective green landscapes, leaving just enough space for the viewer's imagination to fill in the blanks. There are also splashes of color that seem to almost take over the room — bold reds and yellows clashing on the canvas — standing alongside pieces that work with muted tones, evoking a sense of stillness. The tension between these extremes invites you to oscillate between stimulation and contemplation.

The range of artistic styles on display reflects a deep engagement with both personal expression and collective identity. The variety of brushstrokes, mediums, and subject matter could easily clash, but here they coexist in a way that feels organic. No single artistic approach dominates. It's as if the artists are participating in a shared dialogue about what it means to express something authentically.

Wandering through the exhibition also feels like moving through different emotional states — exhilaration, serenity,



Chrysalide Marie-Claire Barsotti



S. Boat by Marie-Claire Barsotti

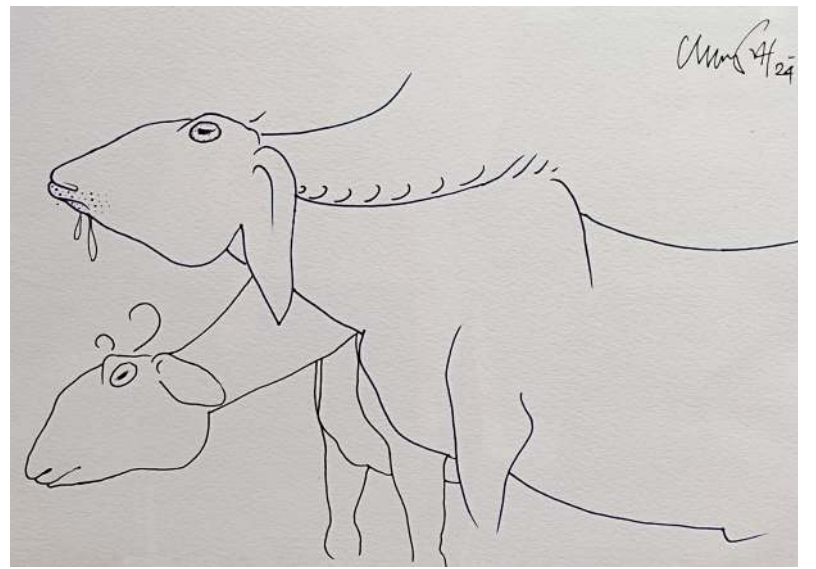


Jejune by Anwar Khan. G

confusion, joy — and yet there is a sense of continuity in how the works are arranged. It's not a rigid order, but an intuitive flow, as if the artworks are talking to each other across the room. The way one piece's jagged edges catch the corner of your eye as you turn toward the softness of another creates a rhythm, a pulse that keeps the viewer engaged.

At its core, *Diversity in Expression* transforms the gallery into a space for connection, where differences are not barriers but bridges. It invites visitors to embrace contradictions and engage with unfamiliar perspectives. Each piece asks us to linger, look closer, and open ourselves to new ways of seeing — ultimately reminding us that, like the art on display, we are all part of a larger, interconnected whole.

Chandra



Line sketch by Charu

Maggi Lidchi-Grassi



Maggi Lidchi-Grassi, an esteemed Friend of Auroville, passed away on the 30th of September 2024, in the early hours of the morning at her residence behind Fertile, at the age of 94.

Maggi was born in Paris on the 9th of May 1930. She first visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1959 and settled there permanently in 1960. She was well-known as an author of works such as *Earthman*, *First Wife*, *Great Sir and Heavenly Lady*, *The Great Golden Sacrifice of the Mahabharata*, and *The Light That Shone into the Dark Abyss*. She also founded *Domani*, an Italian magazine where the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were shared. Additionally, she was actively involved in the publication of *World Union*, the Ashram's magazine.

Beyond her literary contributions, Maggi is remembered as a homeopath and as Mother's secretary. She was responsible for taking letters from Aurovilians to the Mother, arranging appointments for those who wished to meet with Her, and maintaining the birth records for children born in Auroville after Mother's passing.

Maggi also had the honour of being one of the voices to read Auroville's Charter during the inauguration ceremony on the 28th of February 1968.

A devoted follower of the Mother, Maggi played an important role in Auroville's early developments. Together with Nata, she prepared the amphitheater for the inauguration ceremony, while Vincenzo prepared the urn. She and Nata also co-founded Auroshika, an incense-making unit in Edayanchavadi, and later, they established Udavi, initially a school for the children of the women working at Auroshika. Over the years, Udavi has grown into a well-established and recognized school in the community.

Maggi also started the very first Free-Store within the grocery shop that Nata had set up in Edayanchavadi. She later founded the Quiet Healing Center and, more recently, was working on a new project called Stillness—a retreat center she was developing with her companion and partner, Surakshita.

The funeral service was on Thursday, 3rd October, at Karuvadikuppam, Pondicherry

J. Jayaraman



J. Jayaraman, Jairam for those who knew him, joined Auroville at a very young age in 1970. He was born in Alankuppam (1959) and his childhood in the village had been a difficult one. He had ended up staying with his grandmother in Kottakarai, who was also hardly able to look after him. As soon as he heard that Auroville was coming, he applied to

join. With Varadharajan as an intermediary, he was accepted by The Mother and began living with Daniel (an American pioneer Aurovilian) on his farm in Kottakarai. All he aspired to do in Auroville was be of service. Very early on, he worked with Paul Vincent as a tractor driver, ploughing some newly acquired fields which later became Djaima, and started Volunteering at Matrimandir with Ruud (another pioneer Aurovilian), and also as a tractor driver, and in Matrimandir construction work. Later one could find him at the entrance to the Chamber where he served under the guidance of Arjun Puri and John Harper.

While he worked at Matrimandir he stayed at the Matrimandir Camp for many years, then later moved to Shanthi Community.

He got married to Boomadevi and had a daughter, Vijaya and a son, Viji (Vijaykumar).

Unfortunately, he lost both his legs due to gangrene, and his only sadness was that his body would not allow him any longer to be of full service to Auroville. But he did not give up, even though he had to go through multiple operations due to health issues.

Many people driving or cycling past the Matrimandir during the past few years would have seen Jayaraman sitting on his wheelchair on the side of the road close to the Matrimandir gate near the big Peepul tree. He would lovingly greet passers-by and chat with them, and also guide guests who wanted to go to the Matrimandir or were looking for other locations in Auroville. He did this service for a long time, till very recently when, due to a head injury caused by a fall, he passed away on Friday 11th October, 2024, aged 65, at his residence.

The cremation took place at the Auroville Burial and Cremation Ground on Saturday 12th October.

Auroshastri

Auroshastri was born in Pondicherry at Cluny Hospital on July 4, 1975. His father Gerhard asked Nolani for his name and received Auroshastri, meaning "he who has knowledge of the divine law." He spent his early years happily alongside many friends — Aurosylle, Sukrit, Ritam, John Bosco, Mukta, Auralice, Angiras and others while living at Isai Ambalam in Auroville. When he was six, the family moved to Germany for a few years before returning to Auroville in 1989. He attended Kodaikanal International School and at the age of 17 he went back to Germany, where for some years he lived and worked with his father in the clothing industry, travelling a lot. Then their work took them to England for several years before he came back to live in Auroville in 2000 at the age of 25. Among many other things is father taught him to play GO which he continued to enjoy throughout his life.

In later years, he was deeply fascinated by water and dedicated much of his time to researching it. Living waters and natural energies were passions that consumed Shastri, driving his curiosity and commitment to understanding the world around him. He wasn't content with simply reading about concepts—he had to test them, experience them firsthand, and make them his own. Whether it was an experiment he devised or a theory he tested on himself, he held fast to his convictions, even when others didn't understand his thinking.

Walking barefoot on the earth and swimming in the sea were his natural ways of reconnecting, balancing his body in harmony with nature.

Auroshastri had strong convictions and was full of bold, unconventional ideas. He embraced his eccentricity, often enjoying life on the fringe of society. He thought in ways that transcended his time, envisioning a world that others could not always see. He followed his own path and wrote his own life. Throughout his successes and failures he touched many hearts and minds. He is dearly loved and will always be missed. Love never dies.

Auroshastri was buried on 17th of October at the Auroville Burial and Cremation Ground.



PASSINGS

Brief news

Governing Board members meet in Auroville

A report in The Hindu newspaper said that on October 2nd the Board members were apprised of various projects and interacted with various community groups, including representatives from the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC), Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAIER), the Working Committee, the Land Board and the Auroville Town Development Council, in the interest of "fostering dialogue". Subsequently, the Residents' Assembly (RA) Working Committee sent a letter to The Hindu, pointing out that there had been no interaction with any legitimate representatives of the community, and therefore there was no attempt at "fostering dialogue".

Diplomats visit Auroville

On October 4th a delegation of diplomats from various nations visited Auroville. According to a press note, the delegation comprised figures in fields of diplomacy, global business and trade. They mediated in the Matrimandir and surveyed ongoing work on the Matrimandir lake. K. Swarnambika, Deputy Secretary of the Foundation, gave an overview of The Mother's vision for the township.

Meeting with Home Minister

It was reported on Auronet that on Tuesday, September 24th a small group of Aurovilians met with the Union Home Minister in Delhi. Among other things, it was reported that in future he wishes to work with the residents in a collaborative way, and that if any amendment to the Foundation Act is required, this would be done only through consultation with and with the consent of the Auroville residents. The Home Minister was surprised when it was mentioned that Jayanti Ravi was still acting as Secretary of the Foundation and said he would look into it. (Since then it has been confirmed that she is no longer the Secretary, eds.)

Judgement on legality of Foundation Office-Working Committee

The RA Working Committee's Quo Warranto petition against seven members functioning as the Working Committee of the Residents Assembly was dismissed by a judge at the Madras High Court, citing there is no clear framework for selection of the Working Committee. The FO Working Committee later wrote, "This explicitly means that the only legitimate Working Committee, constituted by the Residents Assembly, recognized by the Governing Board and upheld by a court of law, is the one composed of (our) members." However, the judge rejected the Secretary's allegation of perjury against one of the members of the RA Working Committee. The RA -Working Committee responded to this judgement by asserting that "This order does not legitimise the group recognized by the GB as they have not been selected by the RA as per Section 20 of the AVF Act. We are in consultation with our lawyers about possible next steps to be undertaken to once again have full recognition of the legitimate groups selected by the Residents' Assembly."

Mixed messages on entry

The Admission Committee (aka the Auroville Entry Service) reminded the community that there is currently a case pending in the Madras High Court about a document entitled 'Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations, 2023' published in The Gazette of India by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation on behalf of the Governing Board. While we all await a final judgement on this matter from the High Court is awaited, it has granted a stay order

has been granted. A legal opinion was sought, which concluded with the opinion that "It is my opinion that the Admissions Committee selected by the Residents Assembly can continue to function under the 2020 Regulations subject to any further or other orders passed by the Hon'ble Madras High Court".

Essentially what this means is that the Entry Board The Entry Service therefore informed the community that it can continue contacting the current Newcomers for their self assessments and other documentation; contacting the mentors for mentor reports and final recommendations; scheduling interviews; processing the current Newcomers to complete their process in one way or another; and scheduling clarification on Feedback. However, until further notice, the Entry Board Service will not be accepting new applications for any status in Auroville.

The FO -Working Committee, however, declared this to be "misinformation", pointing out that The Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations, 2020, was replaced by the Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations, 2023, in December 2023. This is a Ministry-approved document that is legally binding on all. Moreover, the new process outlined in the new Regulations is that an Admissions and Terminations Scrutinizing Committee will be formed by the Governing Board, composed of five members, at least two of whom will be Residents.

They warn applicants, "Please be informed that going through any process interviews/ meetings/ exchanges will be a mere waste of time and will not lead to you becoming a Registered Auroville Resident or Aurovillian... We empathize with the unfortunate situation you all find yourselves in. We are informed that our legal team is working actively on this, and the situation will be clarified soon."

The RA -Working Committee responded that the FO -Working Committee's 'clarification' contained confusing and misleading statements, pointing out that 'Admission and Termination' has always been a responsibility held by the Residents' Assembly, not by the Governing Board, and this is stated in the Auroville Foundation Act. Also, the Court Order of February 23rd, 2024 is clear. It stays this new regulation because it "erodes upon the power of the Residents' Assembly to allow admissions or cause the termination of persons in the register".

AVI Board letter to Director-General of UNESCO

The Chairman and Secretary of the Auroville International Governing Board have written to the Secretary-General of UNESCO regarding 'disturbing developments' in Auroville. Noting that UNESCO has supported Auroville, they explain that "We are writing to you today to inform you about developments over the last three years that have shaken the very basics and fabric of Auroville, running counter to the noble aims of its founding idea as laid down in the Charter".

The board members report that in its 56 years of existence, Auroville has proven worthy of the trust expressed by the UNESCO resolutions, statements and direct support. "For the last three years, however, Auroville's development has been pushed in a different direction when a new Secretary to the Auroville Foundation took office, appointed by the Central Government. Together with a likewise newly appointed Governing Board, one of the three authorities of the Foundation, they started to dominate and sideline the other two authorities, namely the Residents' Assembly and the International Advisory Council – thus disturbing the well-established balance between the three bodies as enshrined in the Auroville Foundation Act."

They say that as a result the residents of Auroville have been "subjected to severe repressive measures and adverse developments for the community", including non-recognition of existing administrative and working groups, legitimately elected by the Residents' Assembly, and the establishment of groups with the same name, empowered by the Secretary and Governing Board, increasingly composed with Indian officials who have no connection to Auroville's ideals and ethics; questionable land deals; the unnecessary destruction of thousands of trees, that take no account of ecological concerns and previous successes in environmental and climate protection and have a negative impact on the entire bioregion; and refusal to sign recommendation letters for visas needed by non-Indian residents which increasingly jeopardises Auroville's international character and undermines its founding idea.

The letter concludes, "We are reaching out to you to keep you informed about these difficult times for Auroville in which UNESCO has, like us, invested its high hopes for a brighter future of mankind. Please join us in our aspirations for a positive turn of events happening soon."

New Eco Service landfill site

RA L'Avenir reported that on the morning of Thursday, 19 September 19th, the Nine Palms Forest Stewards discovered an area had been cleared without prior notice for a new Eco Service landfill. The issue of where to dump the Auroville landfill waste had been a matter of urgency for around one month, due to neighbours blocking access to the previous site. The Eco Service team had taken the problem to the AVFO 'ATDC', who initially did not respond to the email requests for action. Then the Eco Service team took the drastic action of dumping several loads of landfill waste at Town Hall in order to get their attention.

However, the plot that has been cleared is situated in a highly sensitive zone, being directly above a major water catchment area. Disposal of waste in the selected location may pollute the entire chain of tanks, Kaluvelli swamp and contaminate the water table. Designating a site as a landfill requires careful site assessment, including the location of the site within the watershed and also the geological strata underneath, to check for suitability and to prevent contamination to groundwater and surface water bodies downstream. However, no such process has been followed in this case.

Forest clearances continue apace

A 6 metre wide road has been cleared through Auroville's Northern Forest Area (NFA), in order to gain access to the area that has been earmarked for a 30 meter tall hill to be built from the soil excavated from the Matrimandir Lake. So far, 6 acres of land have been cleared at the hill site and approximately ten 10 more acres are earmarked for clearance in the future. Michael Bonke and the Matrimandir (MM) team are coordinating the project, which will see 1 million cubic meters of soil transported by lorry from the MM to the hill site over the next two years. This project threatens the forest sanctuary and wildlife in the area. Although the cleared areas will be replanted, concerns have been raised that it will not be possible to prevent development in that area now that there is a roadway. There has been no consultation with the community about the hill and, as of now, no Environmental Impact Assessment on the project has been done. (More on this in a future issue of Auroville Today, eds.) Meanwhile, the stewards of Revelation Forest have been informed that the Public Works Department will soon begin clearing the path for the Outer Ring Road through the Sanctuary, a portion of forest that was meant to be free from

human intervention and that is home to several protected and endangered species.

'Red assets' note

In a note from the RA -L'Avenir and RA -Working Committee, they point out that there are feasible alternatives that would allow roads to be constructed without impacting our community's assets. These are the so-called 'red assets' which the FO -ATDC has identified as being on the path of future roads and therefore needing to be destroyed. As the Working Groups put it, "We once more encourage a reassessment of the project to explore these options and prevent further damage to the homes and living spaces of all residents of Auroville, and the further degradation of Auroville's community spirit. It is important to find a balance that respects both development goals and the preservation of the natural environment in which we all live and for which Auroville is renowned... Participatory planning, involving all community voices, is key to finding solutions that reflect shared values and ensure a resilient, harmonious future for Auroville. The residents build the city, not the other way around."

Annapurna Farm in difficulty

Annapurna, Auroville's largest farm, is in financial difficulties. The managers say it is because the stewards' maintenances have been cut by the FO FAMC, along with poor management decisions by Foodlink which has outstanding payments of Rs 3 lakhs to the farm, and problems with Annapurna's dairy. The managers have created a financial plan for a viable future which involves creating wood lots which can act as a financial buffer. For this and for supporting running costs they would require a yearly budget of 5.2 lakhs for five consecutive years. They are requesting donations. More information can be obtained from from indiannatomas@gmail.com.

No new Foundation Secretary yet, but three new Deputy Secretaries

The Auroville Foundation has announced via a recruitment notification that there will be three new Deputy Secretaries, alongside a new Under Secretary, recruited to work in the AVFO. The new positions are Deputy Secretary (Security), Deputy Secretary (Accounts and Audit), Deputy Secretary (Administration).

Earth Shastra Youth Alliance in Auroville

Between 21st - 29th September 21st - 29th, Auroville hosted the 8th edition of Earth-Shastra, a 9-day immersive journey in the lap of nature, that brought together 30 young changemakers from across India. The intention was to make sense of the climate emergency and converging crises of our times. It was a leadership experience to help participants orient their life path in greater harmony with themselves, others and nature. The programme was facilitated by Youth Alliance of India with Auroville's YouthLink and Flourish.

Revising the Residents Assembly Service (RAS) mandate

At a Residents' Assembly meeting, the Council explained that this revision of the RAS mandate has been long overdue. The existing 2007 mandate framed the RAS more as a decision-making body, whereas their actual role is to facilitate processes for the Residents' Assembly and working groups. Therefore, in August 2021, a team was formed to review the RAS mandate, incorporating valuable suggestions from residents. The proposed new mandate will be put to the community for a decision, following the due process as envisioned by the RAD policy, 2023.

About Auroville Today

Auroville Today is an activity of the Kattidikalai Trust of the Auroville Foundation. The GST number is 33AAATA0037BXZV

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Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues :
India: Print + digital edition: Rs 850
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Other countries:
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Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation.
Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.