

Making and implementing the Master Plan

Cristo was the Coordinator of the Auroville Universal Township Integrated Master Plan 1999, the first Auroville Master Plan, which was approved by the community. Here he talks about its background. He also gives his views on changes made in the second Auroville Master Plan, the Auroville Universal Township Master Plan Perspective 2001-2025, which was officialised by its publication in the Gazette of India in 2010, and talks about present developments.

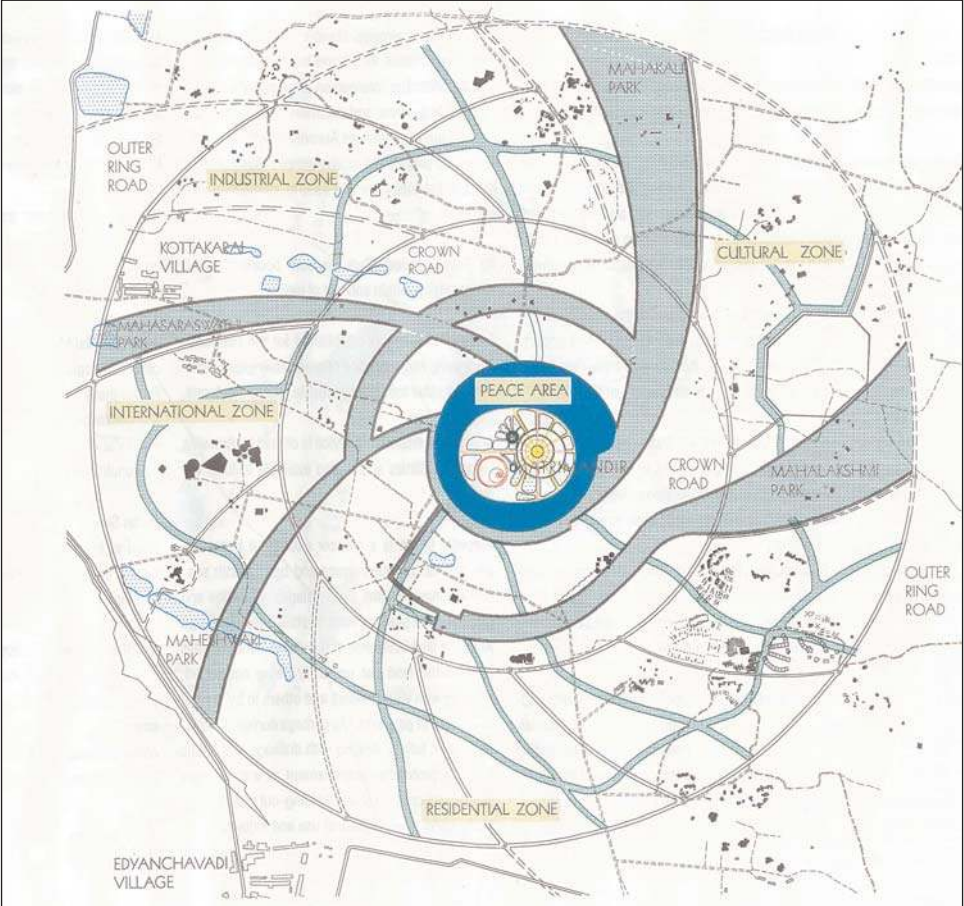
AVToday: What is your background and why did you get involved in drafting a Master Plan for Auroville?

Cristo: Before joining Auroville in 1974, I was working as a trainee transportation engineer in Germany, learning how to design roads and streets. When I joined Auroville, I started a construction service together with Pierre Elouard and others, building houses, schools and workshops. At the end of 1989, I left Auroville to earn money to build a house for myself. I found employment in French Guiana, an overseas department of France on the north east coast of South America. I was in charge of developing the Sinnamary township near Guiana's Space Centre, better known as Europe's Spaceport. This project included not only the construction of all the houses, but also building the roads and infrastructure. It was high-speed work. We managed to get people moving into their new houses within a period of two years. During this time construction also started on a bypass around the launching pad, cutting through dense jungle. We had to ensure that, for security reasons, there would be no development along this road. But of course, it was next to impossible to prevent illegal settlers building along the new highway. My memory of this problem resurfaced when we started working on the Auroville Master Plan many years later.

After I returned to Auroville in 1992 I built my house and was busy with working with the Green Group. Then, in 1994, the first private development happened on privately-owned land in the Green Belt (Sarathas, opposite Courage community). I was extremely distressed and discussed the matter with the then Land Use Coordination Group and with Luigi. The idea came up to start making a Master Plan, as a means to protect the Auroville project. I was tasked with the job of coordinating a team of 15 people who, from 1995 to 1999, prepared the 'Auroville Universal Township Integrated Master Plan'. This document was approved by the community with an overwhelming majority in July 1999.

After you completed your task what happened?

In August 1999, the Governing Board, then chaired by Dr Kireet Joshi, though expressing appreciation for the work, felt that eminent town planning authorities at the State and National level needed to be consulted before formally approving the plan and presenting it to the Government of India. Sri Kireet introduced us to the Central Government's Town and Country Planning Organization (TCPO) in New Delhi. Mr Meshram and Mr Chotani, its Chief Town Planners, agreed to help, as did Mr Dattatri, the former Chief Town Planner of the Chennai Metropolitan authority. Mr Meshram and his officers would stay in Auroville for short periods, while Mr Dattatri came to Auroville a few days each week. They told us to base our work on the 'Urban Development Plans Formulation and Implementation' guide-



The Auroville road network as planned in the first Master Plan (page 41)

lines (UDPFI) of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs of the Government of India, which we did. After four months of further consultation outside and inside Auroville, the 'Auroville Universal Township Master Plan', a refinement of the previous document, was finalised. This is a 25-year Perspective or Directional Plan, which contains the broad concepts and philosophies. It prescribes that 5-year development plans need to be made – which can be made once the ground realities are clear – which are then followed by annual plans that are made for implementation.

This plan, the result of a partnership work between the Auroville Foundation and the TCPO, went to New Delhi. It was officialised by the Human Resource Development Minister, Shri Murli Manohar Joshi, and the Minister of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation, Shri Jagmohan. The document was subsequently approved by the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. For unknown reasons, it was only published in the Gazette of India in 2010.

Were you involved during this entire period?

No, not fully. Once the first Master Plan was achieved I returned to green work but remained active as a Consulting Engineer to the Auroville Development Council, the predecessor of L'Avenir d'Auroville, now known as the Town Development Council, whenever the need arose. In 2000, I was sent to Europe to present the 1999 Master Plan to the Auroville International Centre in Paris, followed by a presentation at an Auroville International gathering in Germany. But when I came back, I learned that a group of Aurovilians had meanwhile continued the work on the second and now approved Master Plan, which has some significant changes from the 1999 document.

What are these changes?

Most prominent is the road network. The 1999 document mentioned a Crown Road, a circular road to be built at a certain distance around the city centre; an Outer Ring Road between the city and the greenbelt; and 12 radials roads connecting the Crown Road to the Outer Ring Road. This road design was based on The Mother's symbol, with the difference that the radials were slightly curved to

follow the flowing movement of the galaxy. But many radial roads, and a large part of the Outer Ring Road, were indicated by dotted lines, as we were not sure they should manifest, or might only be built in some areas.

We had considered including some access roads, but we deliberately did not mention them as we did not want any real estate developer purchasing and developing the lands along those future access roads. For that reason, the document only mentions access by the existing roads. This decision was based on my memory of the problem I had faced in Guiana.

The second Master Plan largely followed the road network of the first Plan. But it added four access roads, a decision which dismayed me as I felt it would invite project developers to purchase the lands along these roads and develop them. This, prediction, sadly, has already come true along the road from Kuilapalayam to Certitude: all privately-owned lands bordering that road are now being commercially developed with restaurants, hotels and shops.

The novelty of this amended Plan was that the four access roads would terminate at four so-called 'nodal points' on the Outer Ring Road, which would serve as transit stations where people could shift to environment-friendly transport to go anywhere within the city. But, like the first Master Plan, the road network within the city, including the outer ring road, was not 'fixed'. It was also clear that any future bypass roads would have to be located outside the Auroville area, and a rough drawing of the propopsas northern and southern bypass was

included in the map.

Was there any reference in either Master Plan to the surrounding villages?

The Perspective Plan does mention the adjoining villages and how they can be integrated within Auroville's philosophy and development. There were plans to translate the salient features of the Perspective Plan into Tamil, and then meet with village leaders and women's groups to refine the plans and incorporate their requirements, so that there would be participatory planning.

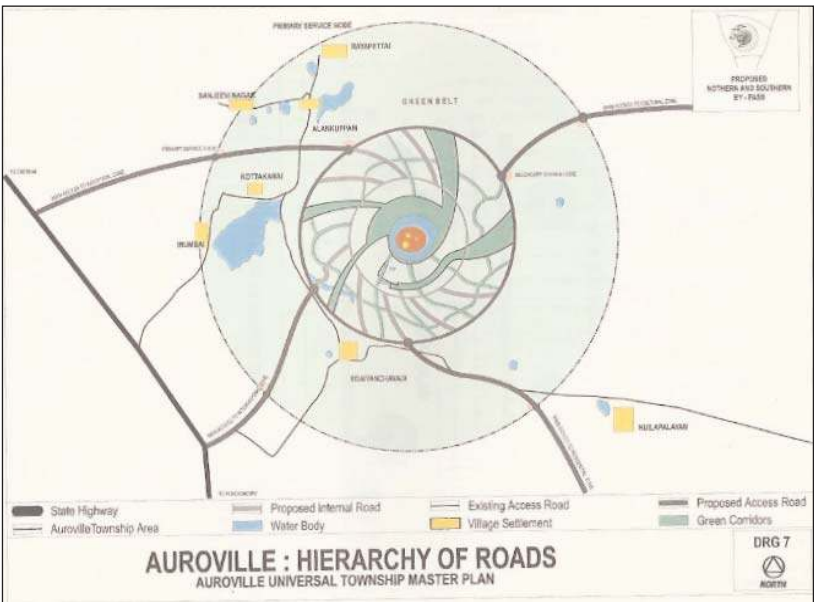
What was the role of Roger Anger, who The Mother had appointed as Chief Architect of Auroville, in the making of the first and second Master Plan?

Roger was a member of the Governing Board which approved the second Master Plan. But during all the years I served, when making the first Master Plan or later as a member of L'Avenir d'Auroville, I do not remember much of his involvement. He was not for any length of time present in Auroville and the contacts with him were mainly through the people who were close to him. He had no direct role nor interfered in the work we were doing. I had only once a personal contact with him, when we discussed the role and the location of some of the radial roads. In these discussions he showed a lot of flexibility. His role, he said, was to set the broad plan of the Galaxy, and the details had to be worked out by others. He was a great man who was, I believe, often greatly misunderstood and sometimes even wrongfully vilified.

What has been the progress since the amended Master Plan was approved by the Governing Board?

Very little. We simply lacked the people with the required professional skills. In 2001, Mr. Dattatri already observed that Auroville was poorly equipped to make Development Plans; and that hasn't changed. Mr. Dattatri spoke about the need for a professional team, consisting of a senior planner, service staff, and quite a few resource people to do surveys and obtain data relating to traffic, sustainable development, economics and so on. But this never manifested.

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Auroville road network as published in the second Master Plan (page 57)

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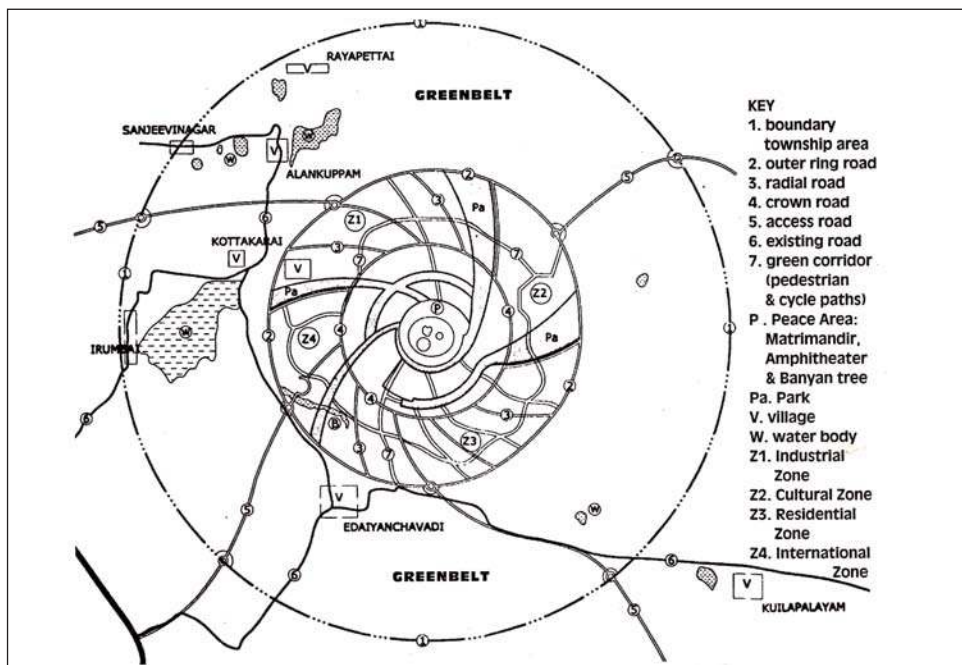
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All successive planning groups consisted mainly of Aurovilians, many of them trained architects, full of goodwill, but without planning qualifications. The group chaired by Governing Board member Shri B.V. Doshi was also not able to make much progress.

A few draft development plans were made, but always by non-Aurovilians. Louis Féduchi, a professor from Spain, together with a Polish visitor Kaja Delezuch, made a draft Development Plan for sectors one and two of the Residential Zone, [see *AVToday* # 308, March 2015, eds.]; David and Achva Stein, landscape architects and town planners from the U.S.A., made a draft Development Plan for the Greenbelt [see *AVToday* 287, September 2012, eds.]. Andréa Cammarata, an Italian town planner, came to Auroville many times to study the International Zone, and is willing to make a Development plan for this Zone [see *AVToday* #356, March 2019, eds.] I loved working with these planners as they are highly qualified. Then there was an Electrical Master Plan made by an engineering company from Calcutta; and Anupama has done a beautiful work on the city centre. But with the exception of the Electrical Master Plan, none of these plans were formally approved and Andréa has not been given permission to start the work. Though his plan was never approved, Féduchi's work now serves as a basis for developing those sectors of the Residential Zone [see *AVToday* #369-370, April-May 2020, eds.]



The road plan of the second Master Plan, as published in *AV Today* # 144 of January 2001

Was there any planning progress with the villages?

That has always been my special interest. For many years we have been working on shared development plans, which led to the creation of Regional Development and Planning Councils with the local Panchayats. [see *AVToday* # 347-348, June-July 2018, eds.] But the Councils only functioned for about three years as the previous Town Development Council team did not continue the work. This is unwise. It is in Auroville's interest to work with the six villages around Auroville and create collective infrastructure and road plans.

Let's go to the present. What was your response when you learned about the plans to start building the entire Crown Road with a total width of 16.7 metres, which includes two shoulders of 5 metres each for use by pedestrians, cyclists and public transport?

I became a member of the L'Avenir d'Auroville team in 2009, and from December 2012 to 2018, I was a member of the first Town Development Council. In both teams I was in charge of infrastructure development. The parameters for the study of the section of the Crown Road from the Solar Kitchen to the Mahalakshmi Home were proposed by me and the study and calculations were done in collaboration with Dirk Nagelschmidt of Aqua Engineering. So I know about road widths and infrastructure corridors. But the present plans for the Crown Road have major flaws. I am working on a report to elaborate these mistakes. The simple fact of making a road this wide, of course, is an indication that it may become just an ordinary road.

So you are against the Crown Road?

No. The Crown Road can and should be done. But I see the Crown as an opportunity to create unity if people come together to discuss and agree how best it can be built; but not when it is

unilaterally imposed. We need a group of everyone concerned. The top-down approach does not work.

And yes, I have reservations. The first and main one is that the only mobility plan approved by Roger Anger in 2005 has never been reviewed and updated. This plan is clearly made for a city where 50,000 residents are living. No phasing has been incorporated, based on population increase, no survey of existing terrain conditions, etc. The present Town Development Council (TDC) is not working in harmony with the approved Master Plan, as it has not produced any Development Plan, including an actualized mobility plan, to justify the building of this road. It is unbelievable that this is being ignored, and that present-day realities are not being addressed.

These realities are of paramount importance. Today there are about 400 cars in Auroville, from 76 some 20 years ago, a figure that will increase in the coming years. Many of these cars are owned by elderly Aurovilians, who have no other way to go around. With Auroville having two buses and one minivan, there is no public transport to speak of – and we have no funds to develop it. Increasingly, motorbikes and cars from outside ply the Auroville roads: guests, people who visit Auroville units, the 7,000 employees, the construction traffic bringing steel and bricks and cement, the courier services and last but not least the through-traffic generated by residents of the surrounding villages using Auroville roads as short cuts. And if in the next few years 4,000 new people join Auroville, as is being promoted by some people, they will bring their own

got any indication as to the direction our studies should take. The choices we make today on mobility will define the way Auroville will develop in the next 25 to 50 years: Towards the City the Earth Needs or just towards becoming another ordinary city for tourists and business.

What are your views about the Outer Ring Road?

I was shocked when I read the response of the TDC to a question of Auroville Today on how the TDC envisages the Outer Ring Road [issue # 387, October 2021, eds]

"For the very reason that the outer ring road passes through adjoining villages, it is important that it remains public and accessible to all. This road will receive traffic from the access roads that would connect the Pondicherry – Tindivanam Highway and the East Coast Road. The main purpose of this road in the context of Auroville is (1) to connect the four zones on the peripheral side of the city and (2) to divert the non-Auroville bound traffic from entering the city."

This, for me, is complete nonsense. In the same para there are two contradictory proposals. It goes against what The Mother said about traffic in Auroville. It goes against the Master Plan which says that the four main access roads would terminate at nodal points on the Outer Ring Road from where people could shift to environment-friendly transport to go anywhere within the city (clearly meaning no private car ownership). It goes against the vision expressed in the Master Plan that any future bypass roads would have to be located outside the Auroville area. Also, the Outer Ring Road as planned by the TDC would bring all the endemic problems connected to highway development into Auroville, such as air and noise pollution. And on lands not owned by Auroville, like the lands in the Greenbelt, there will be strip commercial development with the accompanying issues of garbage dumping, excessive water extraction, ground water pollution, and social issues like alcoholism, violence and prostitution. And I am not even speaking about the fact that such a road would destroy large parts of established forest growth in the Greenbelt and the many Auroville communities that border it.

Does this mean that you consider the Outer Ring Road is a wrong concept?

Yes, in the way it is understood by the TDC today. There are safer alternatives to the imperfect circle that defines the Outer Ring Road. One of these is to segregate traffic. The southern part of the Outer Ring Road from Sharmga to Edaiyanchavadi should be built, but only used by Aurovilians and those who need to visit Auroville. It would have a single connection to the Kulilpalayam – Edaiyanchavadi tar road, which will continue to be the bypass road between the East Coast Road and the Pondicherry-Tindivanam highway. In this way a part of the Outer Ring Road would serve Auroville, without inviting all non-Auroville traffic. Another access point is needed for the Industrial Zone.

What are your reflections on the future?

It took many years of hard work to come to the



Cristóbal

Auroville Universal Township Master Plan Perspective 2001-2025. Now, as we are almost in 2022, I would advise the making of a Detailed Development Plan for the next five years that will serve as the basis for a new Perspective Master Plan. And I wouldn't go for another 25-Years' Plan but for a 10-Year Plan based on the realities of the year 2025. Let the community and Governing Board together decide about the mobility, the food distribution, the zones and entertainment areas, all what we really need. Then make an assessment every two years of what worked and what didn't, and adjust where necessary. And let Auroville hire professional town planners, and appoint an Auroville Interface Team to be the liaison between these professional town planners and the community.

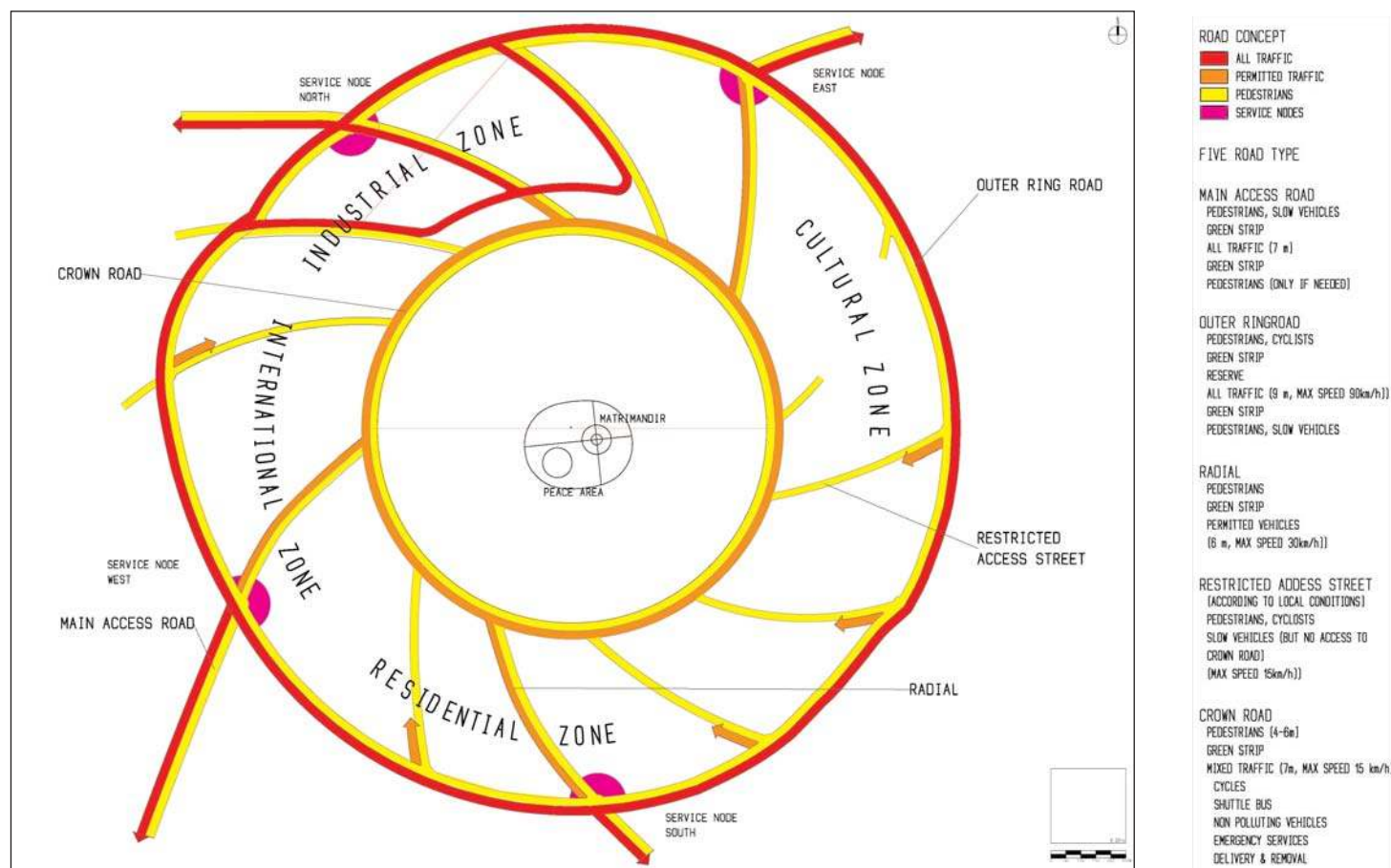
Are you frustrated by the slow pace of development and what's happening today?

Not really. If anything, Mother India has taught me patience. The true development of Auroville is not measured in the number of buildings and roads that have come up, but in the increasing manifestation of human unity and the development of people's consciousness. I think I see that happening, particularly in children.

Regarding today's developments: much as I welcome and admire the drive to acquire all the lands within the Township Area of Auroville, which is absolutely necessary for the manifestation of Auroville, I do not agree with building a road network without a mobility plan and without a harmonious community involvement. I learned from Mr. Dattatri, who I loved dearly, that in Tamil Nadu the best approach towards any successful development is from bottom up, particularly when dealing with the administration and the village elders.

Regarding myself: I've spent 47 years in Auroville, and have gone through many very severe downs and some ups. A certain level of equanimity has developed and a ground for the development of a new consciousness has been laid. This, for me, is the only reason why I am still here, to further develop myself and serve the ideal of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

In conversation with Carel



Proposed road network inside the city area as developed by L'Avenir d'Auroville in March 2003.

The new Governing Board meets

On 2nd November, the new Governing Board met for the first time in Auroville. They visited the Matrimandir and met a few working groups. It was subsequently reported in the Indian press that the Governing Board want a time-bound implementation of the Master Plan, and they discussed ways to carry forward goals in sectors ranging across housing, infrastructure and greening initiatives in Auroville. They also decided that the focus should be on creating infrastructure to accommodate at least around 15,000 residents who share the Auroville philosophy.

In the late afternoon, four members of the Board – Shri Ravindra Narayana Ravi (Hon'ble Governor of Tamil Nadu), Shri Aravindan Neelakandan, Professor Goutam Ghosal, and Professor Sarraju, accompanied by Dr. J. Ravi, Secretary of the Auroville Foundation – attended an open meeting with the community. Here is a summary of what transpired.

In an impromptu address, the Governor explained that although his higher studies were in physics, the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo “came to me as a legacy from my parents”. As a young student he was also familiar with Mother’s vision, “to create a place on this earth where people from all nooks and corners of the world could feel free...to coexist happily.”

He noted that the foundation of this dream has been laid, but that there had been difficulties which required government intervention. Consequently, the Auroville Foundation was created 33 years ago with the “intention to help the growth of this city, help the realization of Mother’s wish, her dream”. And with that vision, the Master Plan was designed to develop the city.

He felt that the Aurovilians had done an excellent job, “but when we dispassionately look at the status of things here, there are questions that come to mind”. For example, Mother had a dream that this would be a city of about 50,000 people but more than 50 years later, it has only reached about 8% of that number. The population is aging because young people are not joining, and the basic infrastructure is lacking.

“So I think somewhere something has gone



Governing Board members and the Secretary, Auroville Foundation, interacting with Auroville residents on November 2nd. From left: Shri Aravindan Neelakandan, Dr. J. Ravi (secretary), Shri Ravindra Narayana Ravi, Professor Goutam Ghosal, Professor Sarraju.

amiss, and while individually we are all committed, collectively we are missing something, and we have to correct it, build the infrastructure and restore a spirit of collectivity in this small community. We have to see that Auroville grows and the experiment becomes a resounding success, because 50 years down the line I’m afraid we have yet to give that signal that this is a great, successful experiment. Because the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and translating that into the vision which Mother did cannot be a failed philosophy or a failed vision. It has to succeed, there is no alternative.”

He explained that it was with this in mind, “that this experiment must succeed before it gets too late,” that the Prime Minister constituted this new Governing Board. “The Government is again here to offer a hand to assist this community to build the Auroville of Mother’s dream.”

He concluded by urging all those committed to the dream to come together, “for you are the

chosen ones... If there are differences, overcome these because the underlying unity is there.”

As to the role of the new Governing Board, he said they are here to assist the residents. For “It is your place, you have to run it.”

After other members of the Governing Board said a few words, Frederick, a long-time Aurovilian, shared his thoughts. “I was asked in the morning why we take so much time (to manifest the city)... and I fully agree. I do not want to wait any longer. We want the city, we want Mother’s dream to show.”

However, he mentioned from his personal experience a few ways in which Mother had dealt with Auroville in the past. For example, when she was asked if the Ashram teachers could come to help educate the Auroville children, she refused. “She said you cannot start something new by copying something from outside. You have to create it from within yourself.” Similarly, when he asked her if he should join Auroville, she told him

that he should find the answer within.

Frederick felt that in evolution there are ‘leaps’. “And I feel Auroville is another leap. It is not a copy or an enlarged ashram....And the actual leap is in the working together, in the collaboration, in collective aspiration.”

He acknowledged the important role the new Secretary is playing in emphasizing the need for us to speed up. “But the process is the crucial thing.... and if you give us, not forever, a chance to come from within, to listen within, and not take an outside solution and stamp it on top of us, I think you honour the spirit for which we all came. That is my appeal.”

After a few other Aurovilians shared their thoughts, the Governing Board was asked how they planned to work with the new International Advisory Council. The Chairman replied that they had not yet had a formal meeting with them, but “within the ambit of the Act, we will definitely take all their views into account and your views, and will move forward with them.” However, he emphasized that it is the Governing Board that has the overall responsibility for the management of Auroville.

As to giving the community more time to find a unifying solution from within, he remarked that “fifty years is too long if the people have not come together... There was a time after the Mother’s demise that the parliament had to intervene to save it. And now, again, after 30 years, we are still far away from the dream. So therefore the Government has come again and intervened in the way of giving financial assistance and asking our governing body to move it forward.”

He felt that people outside are losing faith in Auroville. “The dream of The Mother is being questioned; the experiment that she started is a failed experiment as it appears today.” He feels that Auroville must become a “strong magnet” to attract people from all over the world. “That magnet we have to create and we will do that with the help of you all. Not that we are here to create, you will create. We are here as a catalyst, that is what our role is. We will give the resources and we will be a catalyst.”

EDUCATION

The multiversity proposal

In the last month, rumours have been circulating about a multiversity in which Auroville would play a central role. After much criticism that the Residents Assembly was not being consulted on such an important topic, on 9th November the Working Committee finally circulated version eight of a draft Sri Aurobindo International Multiversity Bill with a request for comments.

Described as a “unique prototype of a university of tomorrow”, the multiversity would consist of a loose conglomerate of institutes and centres which would establish new patterns of teaching and learning intended to serve as models for the nation and the world.

We asked Hemant from the Working Committee and a member of the group which has worked on the bill, to provide some further clarification about the multiversity concept, its impact on Auroville and the Auroville Foundation Act, and to what extent the Residents’ Assembly can modify or reject the proposed bill, which, after approval of the Indian Parliament, would become an Act.

Auroville Today: How did this concept originate?

Hemant: Last year, Ms. Tara Jauhar from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch was asked by the the Ministry of Culture to bring together all the institutions which are connected with Sri Aurobindo, and come up with one collective idea of how India should celebrate the hundred 50th anniversary of Sri Aurobindo. The core group (Anu, Hemant, Juergen, Christine and Meenakshi) of the Auroville 150th team, constituted by the Working Committee, started interacting on behalf of Auroville. The discussions that followed included representatives of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, the Sri Aurobindo Society, the Gnostic Centre in New Delhi, SACAR in Pondicherry and several other centres from India.

In the first meeting it was suggested that Pondicherry University be renamed Sri Aurobindo International University, which was actually the original intention. This didn’t get anywhere. This evolved to an idea which Mother had considered in 1951 which was to start a Sri Aurobindo University in Pondicherry. This resonated with the others, but was subsequently dropped as universities have to follow regulations which would stifle the practice of integral education. The larger group then started exploring the idea of forming a loose network of Sri Aurobindo organizations and institutes of integral education which would be allowed by the government to offer certification for courses, or learning experiences, offered in these places. For the need for some form of certification had long been felt by almost all these centres.

When the new Secretary joined Auroville, Tara Didi invited her to participate. Subsequently, the Secretary circulated a paper she had written in collaboration with Kireet Joshi many years ago, when they were both in government service in Gujarat. This is where the term ‘multiversity’ originated. All the other centres involved liked the idea of a network of learning centres where students could go, have multiple learning experiences, and receive, if necessary, some kind of a credit or certification.

The concept was presented to the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Education. They liked the idea, and said it could be developed. At this point our Secretary suggested it could be started as an Act of Parliament, as an Institute of National importance, as this would be the right offering to Sri Aurobindo in his 150th birth anniversary year.

Subsequently, a sub-group, consisting of representatives from Auroville, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch, Gnostic Centre, SACAR, Sri Aurobindo Society, and Auro University, along with a legal expert on university laws, Prof. Dhruv

Chhaya from Gujarat, worked for about three months and submitted a concept note-cum-draft bill to all the participating centres for further feedback. This is what has now been presented to the Auroville community for their comments.

Was the larger purpose to bring Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s educational philosophy of integral education to a larger India? Or was it simply a rebranding of existing institutions of integral education?

It started with rebranding, but then it became an attempt to bring integral education into the mainstream, something Kireet Bhai had always been very concerned about.

What would being part of this multiversity mean for Auroville?

The current thinking is that the Auroville Foundation itself would not be part of the multiversity. However, certain centres or activities in Auroville, like the Earth Institute, could independently affiliate to the multiversity if they wished to. There would be two kinds of students. Those who have grown up here and want to obtain some kind of educational certification without leaving Auroville; and students from outside who are doing normal studies like law, engineering or medical studies, but who are taking time out from these courses for an experience which broadens their personality. For, apart from training programmes, Auroville offers the kind of experiential learning which can lead to individual transformation.

A student here could take a six months course from a multitude of choices like pottery, woodwork or forestry, or they could work in the Ashram, and for each of each of these learning experiences, which would be structured – they couldn’t just turn up – they would be eligible to receive a credit. When they have accumulated a



Hemant

certain number of credits, they could receive, if they wish, a degree from the multiversity. These credits could also be traded with other universities. If this multiversity is recognized by the Indian Government as an Institute of National Importance, as is proposed, all Indian universities would automatically recognise these credits and students could also continue their studies there. Eventually, many international universities may also recognize these credits.

So a body like a multiversity would give some kind of recognition to Auroville educational activities based on evaluation processes designed by us, not by any other examination board or institution.

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But already many students come to Auroville for work experience and gain credits for this back in their home educational institutions.

Actually, only a handful of foreign universities give credits at the moment for their students who have pursued courses or studies in Auroville. No Indian university does this, though many students come here for an internship or a practicum as part of their studies.

The draft multiversity bill which has been circulated proposes that Auroville would be the administrative hub of the multiversity. What powers would it have? And how would it relate to the Auroville Foundation?

In the present draft, the coordinating and networking liaison centre between the Affiliating Institutes/Centres for programmes, courses and research would be in Auroville. However, after the first feedbacks received from Auroville, it’s clear that the Administrative Hub should not be located in Auroville. This change will be incorporated in subsequent drafts.

So does that mean that present community concerns that it would impinge upon the powers of the present Foundation, and even, eventually, take it over, are groundless?

Yes. To set up the multiversity would require a separate act of Parliament, and if there are two acts they function independently. The multiversity would be a different institution with a different purpose from that of the Auroville Foundation. In fact, the Auroville Foundation as an entity would not be part of the multiversity, for the multiversity is not an Auroville project but a project of the Sri Aurobindo Centres in India. We are not stakeholders. But different Auroville activities could be involved, if they wish, and we can give suggestions about how to improve the draft.

Why does this multiversity have to be created by an Act of Parliament?

The multiversity could also be created through incorporation as a Society or a Trust. But if it was created in this way, it would not have the power to offer degrees or diplomas, and receiving money from abroad would be much more difficult. Private universities in India fall under the framework of the University Grants Commission. If you want to do something new and innovative, which is what the multiversity would be, then you need a separate Act. Moreover, the multiversity is planned to be an Institution of National Importance, and this can only be done by an Act of Parliament.

What is the present status of the project?

The project is at an early stage of evolution.

The draft which is being circulated is a work in progress. It will require many more iterations, if it is to progress at all. These are initial ideas which are evolving as we broaden our consultations. Nothing is fixed as yet.

We’ve had a discussion with the SAIER Board, and arrived at the following agreements:

- 1) *For the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo it’s a great idea to have a multiversity.*
- 2) *The Auroville Foundation cannot be an affiliate of this multiversity.*
- 3) *If there are units and places in Auroville that want to offer programmes to the multiversity we should be able to make that possible.*

In terms of the way forward, one of the things we agreed on is that whatever happens, the experimental nature of Auroville and the education that happens here cannot be affected in any way.

We have also gone through the present draft line by line with the Secretary and clarified, among other things, that we feel the hub should be outside Auroville, and that the Auroville Foundation should not be one of the affiliates as, technically, the Auroville Foundation is an umbrella of many different activities and therefore cannot become an affiliate of an educational institution. My understanding is that the Secretary has accepted these inputs.

So the Residents Assembly is not being presented with a fait accompli?

No, nothing has gone officially from the Working Committee to the Governing Board or the Government yet. The idea was presented to the Ministry of Culture as part of the 150th Anniversary celebrations and the Secretary has talked to the Minister of Education about it, and it seems he liked the idea, and she may also have brought it to the Prime Minister. The new Governing Board has not yet received a draft, although they have been informed by the Secretary that this idea is cooking. Of course, we can’t prevent the possibility that somebody has shared it with them unofficially.

But, officially, the first large group we have shared the draft with is the residents, and the future of the multiversity regarding Auroville’s involvement is in our hands.

I see three possible options concerning Auroville’s involvement. We can say ‘no’, or ‘we fully agree’, or ‘yes, but with modifications’.

Is there a clock ticking on this?

No, I think we need to chew on the idea, examine all the feedback and iron out the bugs before we proceed any further. This may take time, but in my view, we should take the required time. The only time constraint is the link to the 150th celebration. Feedback which involves many more people, utilizing open google docs, meetings with stake holders in the education sector of Auroville and open

meetings, will definitely enrich the process.

What are the concerns expressed in the feedback you have received so far?

One concern is that the administrative hub will be in Auroville, another fear is that Auroville will be taken over under the guise of this. I’ve already clarified that this is baseless.

Another concern is that the proposed organizational structure of the multiversity is very top-heavy, for it is suggested that the administrative hub shall consist of a Governing Council, an Integral Learning Council, and Executive and Coordinating Councils! It needs to be redesigned the structure in such a way that the free progress element is not diluted, and the principle of integral education respected. Also, the people populating these Councils should be from places where free progress is happening – like the Ashram, Auroville and other centers of learning – or experts in integral education. This is very crucial. So the challenge is to redraft the proposal so it fits more with the integral education value system, yet is acceptable to bureaucrats in Delhi.

It has also been expressed that Auroville should not be involved with anything which involves the awarding of degrees and diplomas, as The Mother wrote in The Dream that in that place “education would be given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts but to enrich existing faculties and bring forth new ones”. Why can’t we follow what Ashram has done, and develop further education courses in Auroville which would be recognized by universities? Or develop Kireet’s proposal for CIRHU? Or simply receive some form of recognition for the courses we are already running?

Unlike the Ashram, we have not developed our education programme to the undergraduate level because we have far too few students to do this. Many students leave before high school to study in outside schools or, after high school, to study abroad or experience other cultures. With so few students it is practically impossible to develop a programme of higher studies. The only way to do this is to attract students from outside, but to do that we would need to offer them some kind of accreditation.

Actually, even in the conventional world, the award of certificates and degrees is diminishing in importance. The quality of people and their learning capacity is becoming more and more important. The multiversity can help gain some form of recognition for this, something which has always been the strong point of Auroville’s experiential education.

Some institutions, like the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch, as well as the Sri Aurobindo Society, which were originally conceived of as founding members of the multiversity have dropped out. Why is this?

In an earlier draft of the concept there was

something called ‘Founding Affiliates’ and these centres were supposed to take this role. The Founding Affiliates would not have to go through an affiliation process, but they could be subjected to a lot of scrutiny and due diligence, and these places do not want this. So these organizations do not want to be Founding Affiliates. However, The Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, and the Sri Aurobindo Society could each send a nominee to be part of the governing structure, if invited, and they may eventually get affiliated to the multiversity as service providers.

It’s also very clearly mentioned that this Act would not impact the affiliates in any way. They will continue as at present and are free to conduct their usual courses. Only those courses for which recognition by the multiversity is required will be overseen by the Academic Council of the multiversity. At least, that is what is mentioned in the present draft.

The best case scenario, as far as I am concerned, is that Auroville would take the Pondicherry Ashram approach. In other words, we could participate in the governing organization, if invited, and if the groups providing education or educational experiences in Auroville see value they could affiliate directly after the multiversity has been created. We could be a laboratory for experiments and research into integral education, but the administrative hub of the multiversity would be situated elsewhere.

I think an arrangement like this would reduce the weight of all the present fears.

How will the multiversity be funded?

There are many people in the Sri Aurobindo community worldwide who are willing to contribute to this project. If the multiversity is declared an Institute of National Importance (INI), the government will also contribute. Being declared an INI would also simplify the receipt of funds from abroad.

So, essentially, you are positive about the multiversity concept?

It’s important to remember that this did not originate as an Auroville project. It emerged as a collective aspiration from a group of institutions dedicated to Sri Aurobindo, as India’s offering to Sri Aurobindo. From that perspective, I think this is the right thing to do, albeit not in the over-structured way that is being suggested at present. However, if the question is should Auroville be involved with this initiative, I don’t know. It’s not necessary, but I do feel there are some potential benefits, particularly for Auroville students who don’t want to leave Auroville or its environs to receive some kind of qualification or recognition, or for those youth who come to Auroville for learning experiences and who could benefit from these to expand their educational opportunities elsewhere.

From an interview by Alan and Carel

Open meeting on the multiversity concept

On the afternoon of 22nd November, the first open community meeting on the multiversity concept was held. After the origin of the draft Parliamentary Act and the present stance of the Working Committee and SAIER were presented (see accompanying interview), the floor was opened for questions, clarifications and comments, as a means of deciding “where we go from here”. It was also clarified that this is the beginning of a wider process of consultation, and that more meetings like this may be arranged.

Here is a summarised selection (not direct quotes) of what was expressed:

- The draft proposal is not in resonance with the field of experience which Auroville offers. The 150th anniversary calls for new forms which are an organic expression of the world spirit, so let’s not cast the future in conventional ones like this.
- Why are we saying ‘no’ to those Aurovilians who want a certificate so that they can go to college? The question is, is Auroville only for those who reject certificates and qualifications, or is it for everyone?
- Will the multiversity provide land protection against speculation as an Institute of national importance? Answer: No. The multiversity act is not a tool for protecting the land of Auroville.
- It’s important that the next stage integrates the views and knowledge of people who have been involved in integral education in Auroville the last forty years or so.
- As Auroville is a research and development department of novel ideas for the world, there comes a moment when these novel ideas have to be transferred and applied elsewhere. This transfer is difficult and needs the right instruments. But I think the way this multiversity concept has been presented doesn’t compromise the aims of education as laid down by The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.
- Our kids succeed very well outside. We don’t need this structure.
- Mother stood for an education that was not subject to a

utilitarian world. The superstructure of this multiversity would inevitably suppress the creativity and spontaneity of education in Auroville.

- The proposed structure of this multiversity is very top-down and very top-heavy, which is old-fashioned and not aligned with Auroville’s approach to governance. When one looks at the proposed constitution of the governing committee, of the 40 committee members, only four will be from Auroville.
- If we are talking about not wanting the multiversity to give credits or qualifications, we are being hypocritical because most of our schools are preparing students for examinations.
- The Sri Aurobindo Ashram School has an evaluation programme but issues no certificates. When I left the Ashram School, all I got was something that said I had spent 14 years there and studied certain subjects. This is recognized to the level of a BA by Indian Universities and even by some abroad. We should explore this route.
- In Auroville it is the unique experience, which no other school in the world gives, which has value. Why do we want to recreate the old world by educating for certificates?
- Even if only certain activities affiliate to the multiversity, I think it will have an impact on Auroville because resources allocated by the Government to help Auroville education would inevitably be diverted to this multiversity.
- This multiversity proposal is commonplace and backward and we should reject it. It’s been formulated by people who do not have the experience of Auroville. There is something unique about growing up in Auroville, regardless of the school attended. In the end what we want is an inner awakening. As Mother said, we want living souls, not brilliant students. I think that experiments like Auroville are meant to offer the solution to the problems that Mother saw concentrated in India as representative of the whole world. So let us be the cutting edge, let’s not create one more institution.
- A lot of people here feel that we are not in control anymore. There’s a feeling that things are being imposed on us, and if the

Indian government wants to do something, they will simply do it. After the recent Governing Board meeting, there is deep concern that the government feels that Auroville is a failure and now they want to do a better job.

- One point in the draft Act says the Central Government shall have powers to issue directions for compliance for provisions of certain documents, and the Multiversity shall comply. This seems like a clear interference of the Government in Auroville. Are we really free to decide?
- How do we translate a ‘no, thank you’ into something constructive? We are facing a crisis, but a crisis is also an opportunity. Let’s stick to our aims. Let’s give a strong message in the next month that these are our objectives, that we have this proposal and let’s implement it quickly.
- Let’s say, all residents are researchers in a lab, and then let this lab be recognised by bodies outside Auroville.
- The Indian Government is celebrating Sri Aurobindo, paying homage to him, so we shouldn’t just say ‘no’ to this proposal. It looks small minded. Instead we should say, ‘Let’s do it together, but in the right way’.
- Are we really free to say no? Can it happen that we say we don’t want to be a direct stakeholder, but then we end up with an Act of Parliament that mentions Auroville? Answer: If we say at this stage, we don’t want this, and if in the next draft our name doesn’t appear as a founding affiliate, there is nobody who can impose it on us. The only other scenario is if the Governing Board decides it wants this to happen, and then we would have to oppose it. But I don’t think this will happen.

At the end of the meeting, the facilitator said that the Residents Assembly Service will meet with the Working Committee to see how best to compile all the elements raised in this meeting and communicate it to the wider community. The community would be informed of the next steps, which could involve more meetings as well as other ways of harvesting feedback from residents.

Alan

Keeping Auroville healthy in body and pocket

In times of escalating health costs in India, how is Auroville's Health Fund Scheme faring?

Auroville's Health Fund Scheme (AHFS) was established in 2002, in recognition of the fact that many Aurovilians struggle to meet the high costs of healthcare for unexpected or serious illness and complex conditions. In the spirit of Auroville's ideals, the scheme is an internal cooperative health system, where the community carries the medical costs of all members of the scheme. In contrast to most external health insurance funds, it does not aim to make a profit. It offers coverage for a much wider range of treatments than conventional funds, all for a reasonable monthly contribution.

Surprisingly, the Health Fund has never gone into deficit, even though the costs of healthcare are rising and Aurovilians are increasingly undertaking treatment in private medical institutions in Pondicherry. Even though the fund's balance has been very low at times, it has "magically recovered" every time, according to the Fund's administration.

The Fund receives approximately 11 lakhs each month in member contributions and all this income is used to cover members' healthcare costs. It receives no extra funding, such as donations or a regular budget from Auroville. Participation is mandatory for Newcomers, and strongly recommended for Aurovilians. The majority of Aurovilians and Newcomers are enrolled in the scheme – at last count, it had 2099 adult members and 513 children. Members' monthly contributions were recently increased to Rs 500 per month for adults (Rs 250 for children), after being fixed at Rs 450 for six years.

As well as covering standard items such as visits to Auroville's doctors, the Fund offers reimbursements for a wide range of items, including prescribed medicines, blood, urine and stool tests, glasses, hearing aids and orthotic care (shoe modification by an Auroville orthotist), and certain alternative therapies offered in Auroville, such as homeopathy, acupuncture, Ayurveda and Tibetan medicine. The coverage for hospital expenses is wide, and includes specialists' fees, medicines, scans and x-rays, dialysis, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, pace-makers and lenses.

Inevitably, there are challenges to managing a health fund with an ageing population, especially with rising healthcare aspirations and the proliferation of costly, high-end treatments in the last decade.

Given that many of Auroville's pioneers are now in their 70s

and 80s, there is an increasing number of age-related medical expenses being claimed, especially for surgeries like cataract removal and hip or knee replacement. And while Newcomers over the age of 55 years old are required to have their own private insurance in addition to membership in the Health Fund (because older people are perceived as posing a higher financial risk to other members), many Newcomers drop their private health insurance when they become Aurovillian, which means their expenses might fall back on Auroville more generally as they age.

The Fund's administration also explains that there is sometimes a conception that the Fund is like a health insurance scheme, in which people have a choice of private hospital. However, the Fund aims to provide equal support to all members, which financially means there are some limitations around choosing a hospital. The scheme has 'empanelled' approximately 18 Pondicherry hospitals into the Fund (which involves making specific price agreements) which means that Aurovilians are refunded for most costs of hospitalisation in those institutions, based on a certain room category which defines the overall cost. But if Aurovilians want to have surgery at a private hospital in Chennai, they have to pay the extra costs that exceed the Fund's cap on costs.

The Fund often recommends JIPMER hospital to its members – a Central Government teaching hospital in Pondicherry. This recommendation is made not to save the Fund money (most treatment in JIPMER is free), but because of JIPMER'S reputation for a high level of medical expertise. In fact, patients from all over south India travel to JIPMER for treatment. However, many Aurovilians find the crowds and long waiting times to be onerous there, and therefore opt for a private institution with shorter waiting times and more personalised care. The Fund's administration suggests that Auroville could follow the Ashram's example and create a liaison person with JIPMER, which could make admission easier and faster for Aurovilians. They emphasise that medical expertise at private hospitals is not necessarily better, and Aurovilians sometimes end up dissatisfied with the health outcome while having to pay a very high bill – only part of which is paid for by the Health Fund.

Another difficulty the Fund staff cites is that health conditions stemming from unhealthy lifestyles, including alcohol abuse or smoking, place a burden on collective funds.

Home care expenses (such as a home nurse or attendant) are not covered by the Fund as they are generally very expensive, and the costs of long-term care in a nursing home facility are considered on a case-by-case basis. Auroville has attempted to address this issue through the creation of Marika Home and Mahalakshmi Home, where elderly Aurovilians can reside and receive a high level of care.

While there have been suggestions to place a 'cap' on the total reimbursement given to one person (for example, if a member has a series of costly hospital surgeries or ongoing treatment for complex conditions), there is currently no limitation on the maximum refund a person can receive. This policy is currently being reviewed, as the Fund is becoming depleted by the recurring expenses of a small number of members.

The Fund's administrators emphasise that one of the most difficult parts of their job is that of being in a small community, where they are known to many, and seemingly approachable. Some members approach them in public spaces with an expectation that a claimed refund will be granted, or phone them at random hours to express disagreement about reimbursements. This is in contrast to the lack of personal contact that characterises external insurance funds.

When complicated reimbursement cases arise, a support group appointed by the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) gives its input and makes the final decision. When Fund members disagree with the outcome, they can appeal to the BCC.

The pandemic has also posed challenges, and has led to an increase of general hospital costs. For example, PPE kits worn by doctors and nurses for any kind of procedure are now added to hospital bills, often increasing the bill by Rs 5000 – Rs 10,000 (depending on the duration of the stay at the hospital), as are Covid tests for anyone admitted to hospital for any kind of treatment.

Despite these challenges and increasing costs, Auroville's Health Fund Scheme is a fair initiative when one compares the monthly contributions and lack of cost caps against the average cost of general health insurance in India, which can cost two or three times the price and has strict caps on costs. The scheme can be seen as an example of how Auroville can intersect with rapidly commercializing external sectors through supporting community members to access such services while acting in the interests of Auroville's values and cooperative spirit.

Lesley

AGRICULTURE

Rooftop hydroponics

The rooftop of Akash and Monica's studio apartment in Maitreye looks futuristic. It is lush and green with lettuce and rucola plants, but they are grown without soil! Akash and Monica have been experimenting with hydroponic agriculture for the last 12 years and call their venture "The Sprout". They feel ready now for the next stage – to have a restaurant that will serve fresh salads and other items from the hydroponic farm.

In hydroponics, plants are grown without soil and float in nutrient-rich water. NASA is using hydroponics to provide fresh and healthy food to astronauts on long duration missions. Given that land and water will become increasingly scarce, the movement towards hydroponics is forecasted to get stronger. Hydroponic agriculture uses only about 10% of the water and land required for conventional agriculture. It even enables vertical farming. Akash and Monica are able to grow 1200 heads of lettuce in 70 square metres of their rooftop.

However, hydroponics is not the only thing this entrepreneurial couple does. Akash Heimlich, who was born in Auroville, is a software developer, an embedded system designer, and has a passion for anything related to renewable energy and energy efficiency. In 1997, he founded Cynergy, a software and hardware solutions company. In 2013, he launched their highly popular product, Wattmon, a remote energy monitoring and control solution, which is sold in over 40 countries.

Monica holds degrees in biology and biochemistry from the University of Navarra, Spain. She came to Auroville in 2002 when she was 24 years old. She says, "I worked in about ten jobs in the first two years. I worked in the Health Centre, Botanical Garden, Matrimandir nursery, Aurobrindavan lab, but finally I chose to study graphic design with Suzanne in Lumière." She now uses her skill in graphic design to help Cynergy in corporate image building.

Monica recalls their beginning years, "Every evening Akash and I would finish with our computers and then we would go into the garden to grow plants." In Maitreye, every resident was allocated a tiny plot for a garden. And they loved potting in their tiny garden. Monica says, "The garden was small but required a lot of maintenance. Digging, weeding, watering, putting manure and then, sometimes after weeks of hard work, we would find all the plants eaten up by snails and other pests." They tried aquaponics (which is a combination of aquaculture and hydroponics) but had to stop it after a cyclone damaged the aquaponic system at Reve.



Monica and Akash

They read about hydroponics on the internet and were fascinated with this new way of growing plants. And so their garden shifted to the rooftop. Monica continues, "Hydroponics is technically more complicated, but once it is set up, there is almost zero maintenance. And it was fantastic to grow salad without mud. I had a lot of problems before with parasites like amoebas and other microorganisms. But with hydroponics you remove all that, as there is no risk of contamination by parasites in this method."

Akash and Monica have visited a number of hydroponic farms in Thailand, Malaysia and Bali. They also met an agriculture chemist in Thailand who had created her own nutrient mixture formula, and she generously shared this with them. Says Monica, "This formula is working well for us. Professional formulas are more

effective and faster but they are also much more expensive."

An interesting fact is that the nutrient formula used by Akash and Monica works well when mixed with normal water but does not work well if RO (reverse osmosis) purified water is used (some hydroponic units use only RO water). The conclusion is that normal water has some nutrients which help in plant growth that are missing in RO water.

Akash explains that the process of growing a hydroponic lettuce starts by putting a seed in a small rockwool cube. Rockwool is a medium to hold the plant and does not provide any nutrition. For the first 10 to 12 days, these seeds are watered 3 to 4 times a day using an automatic sprinkler system. Then they are shifted to the main grower pipes where the roots dip into a nutrient rich stream of flowing water. The entire cycle to harvesting takes about 40 to 60 days.

Akash explains, "This whole system is very rudimentary. We started off with a whole bunch of automation and the whole thing ran well for some months, but then it became a bit unstable. And we realized that doing it simply is as good

as doing it in a complex manner. It's a very simple system – we use PVC pipes with holes drilled into them to put the lettuce plant in. There is one single tank at the bottom with nutrient water which circulates with the help of a simple aquarium pump which costs INR 400."

It may sound simple but their hydroponic system has gone through many tweaks over time. For example, earlier they used coco peat as the growing medium, but it would dissolve and clog the pipes. They also tried fabric and sponge but found pre-cut rockwool to be the best medium. The biggest challenge for them has been the climate in Auroville. They have learnt over time that it is better to stop growing during the extreme heat of the summer months, but they are able to grow lettuce for 8 to 9 months of the year. There are other unusual challenges they have faced. For example, a clever crow which used the plant hole to dip his food in water to make it soggy, and bees which decided to build their beehive on one of the grower pipes. Their latest challenge is dealing with the after effects of the last storm in Auroville which destroyed the plastic sheeting which covers their rooftop.

While there was initially some resistance to hydroponically-grown vegetables, that has changed now and most Aurovilians appreciate the fresh and juicy lettuces. Currently, they sell their lettuces through the Auroville outlets 'Bread and Chocolate' and 'Hers'.

Monica mentions that they are mainly able to sell lettuce and some rucola. She tried parsley but there was not much demand for it. She also grew spinach but the market was flooded with spinach at the time, so the price was too low.

But things will change once they have their own hydroponic farm-cum-restaurant. Their idea is to have a salad and sandwich bar on one side, and Monica's renowned pastries on the other side. Two and a half years ago, Akash and Monica applied to Auroville's Town Development Council (TDC) for permission to create a hydroponic farm-cum-restaurant. They were thrilled when three months back the TDC finally approved their application. However, there are still some formalities pending, such as site selection and approval.

Hopefully soon Aurovilians will be able to eat healthy salads and then, guilt-free, gorge on Monica's desserts!

Archana

Holding spaces for being and healing

As I'm swept gently through the warm water in Dariya's arms, I perceive intense colours behind my closed eyes. My daily concerns fall away from me, and I start to feel weightless in this seeming alternative reality where one is not required to do anything, other than simply relax and surrender to the process. As I'm discovering, aquatic bodywork can submerge the receiver in an entirely different experiential and sensory realm, where distinctions of body and exterior world dissolve. As Dariya massages my back muscles and coaxes my deeply-relaxed body into different movements, I feel as supple as seaweed drifting on the ocean's surface. At the end, it takes some time to come back to earth and to reintegrate myself into the rhythms and reality of the regular day.

The skill of holding space

Over the next two weeks, as I participate in the other activities Dariya offers – Dance Offering, Women's Temple – I consider what it takes to be the facilitator of therapeutic spaces and experiences that offer the possibility for transcendence. On one level, these therapeutic modes may appear to offer relief from the realities of the world, and a freedom from the restrictive bodily dispositions we inhabit in daily life. But in the larger sense, Dariya emphasises, they can be an avenue to a kind of self-knowing that can come from 'letting go' and simply being, rather than doing. They also offer an important sense of ritual, which she says is often lacking in contemporary life, even though many of us continue to yearn for "a connection to something much bigger".

Dariya highlights the necessity of 'holding space' as a facilitator or therapist across all these therapeutic modalities, while acknowledging that these skills have always come naturally to her. The concept of 'holding space' is the act of listening with the intention of deeply hearing and possibly understanding, rather than problem-solving, and to be open to whatever emotions arise, and allow others to express vulnerability whilst they retain their agency.

Dariya's natural facilitation skills have been further developed over the years through her extensive training in dance, aquatic bodywork (Watsu, OBA, Water Dance etc.) and the Awakening Women Institute's global movement. These skills support her in guiding people in raising their awareness, while anchoring their presence in the physical body. Quite simply, to counteract the human tendency to focus on 'doing' in daily life, Dariya supports participants to "go into deeper spaces of experience within themselves" and to "unfold" or open up to what emerges, such as the possibility of inner transformation. "At an embodied level, it's a balance or dance between doing and letting go; between being active and surrendering," she says about the process she facilitates.

Whether on land or in water, for Dariya, all these spaces are an invitation to practise attentiveness, awareness and being fully present, in a more embodied mode of consciousness expansion than those practised on the meditation cushion. For her, all these therapeutic modalities are possible bridges between the so-called mundane and so-called spiritual aspects of oneself and life.

Early days

Dariya was always interested in dance or "expressing through the body" as she grew up in Slovenia. "In high school or at dance parties, where most dancers simply rocked side-to-side, me and my friend would take up one-third of the dance floor to express what moved through us," she recalls of her exuberant dancing. "As well as asking questions that would get me into trouble in church, school and family, I've been always very physical: climbing trees and doing sports. In the capital city where I studied, I went to jazz dance class and it was all about performing and competition." The competitiveness put her off dance at the time. Searching for a place to belong, and wanting to satisfy her sense of adventure, she started to travel. "I never felt at home – I always felt I didn't fit in. I was always looking for my place in the world where I could feel at home." She found a yogi in a cave in Greece with whom she studied Ashtanga Yoga for some time. Following his suggestion, she travelled to India, and eventually arrived in Auroville. "I felt, 'This is it!'" It has people from all over the world, and it belongs to humanity." Auroville has now been her home for 31 years. "It is a place where I am able to be who I am, allowing this to unfold and grow, and share this with people in diverse ways. I never knew if it's going to be forever, but it is my home."

In Auroville, she began participating in dance classes, even though learning choreographed dances was not her forte. "The others would go left, and I would go right! But I didn't care because I was so happy. My body eventually learned how to follow steps." Dariya became part of the Auroville Dance Laboratory that existed at the time, which even toured some cities in India. She then discovered the Japanese form of movement Butoh, and undertook rigorous training with Butoh teacher, Masaki. "It's very organic and unconventionally beautiful. I loved it, even though it was a very intense physical and mental training." She then started to guide a Butoh group of 12 interested people in Auroville, who explored meanings and beliefs of human existence. They created some group performances in Pitanga, and Dariya also danced a solo called "Cycles of Life-Death", which explored a non-dualistic understanding of being. One week later, she had a serious accident which injured her leg, and this collided with an intense period in her life which posed many personal challenges. Dariya decided to stop Butoh, and started to embrace free-form dance as self-expression. This is when she began her Dance Offering sessions (previously



Dariya giving an Aquatic Body Work treatment to Pragyna

named Dance Space), which have been going on for over 20 years now.

Free expression through dance

Dance Offering is a weekly session that offers a space where everyone can participate and move in their own authentic way in response to the music, people and space. The only requirements – the 'riverbanks' to hold the 'free space' – are no talking or whispering, and a commitment to be present and aware as much as possible. "No matter your ability, age or previous experience, you can express life through movement that's unique to your body," says Dariya.

The sessions begin with introspection in the form of a short guided journey into the present moment as it unfolds within each participant. It continues with a 'welcoming circle' where each person brings into the circle their name and an intention for the session. And then the space shifts into stillness – for most participants, this means lying down and deep listening. There are no suggestions for movements as the music builds; participants can stay in the corner or dance as gently or wildly as they feel. Dariya explains that she isn't required to do anything specific as the facilitator, other than to remain completely present while fully participating and to "just allow" the improvisation process to unfold along five sub-lines: listening, allowing, unfolding, celebrating, offering.

Ideally, the sessions offer a space for participants to transcend the social conditioning that has shaped their body over a lifetime, to adhere to conceptions of what is beautiful or non-beautiful movements or 'appropriate' bodily behaviour in order to impress someone. "I say it's like kindergarten for big people," says Dariya with a smile. "It's like being in that 'no mind' state before the age when children become too self-conscious, yet with the presence and awareness of adults. The sessions allow that more embodied sense of self to come forth. Insights and wisdom might emerge from that space. These are intimate learnings based on direct experience, which differ from learnings from books, movies or a teacher." Towards the end of each session, some participants explore contact dance with others. In this way, they can experience "what binds and connects us, rather than what separates us", says Dariya.

The music playlist is expertly curated, building slowly to a joyful high-point, encouraging people to process through a journey of listening, rest and movement towards ecstatic expression, before easing into a soothing finale. I began my own participation in the session feeling tired and having little plan to dance. But surprisingly, I became swept up in the collective energy and the rhythmic soulful music, and found myself whirling around the room with joy and some abandon. Having played out this 'kindergarten' aspect of myself, I then gladly yielded to the collective ritual at the end, where we each shared a word that described our state. "At the end, we bring it back down into a release and an offering," says Dariya. "So the whole dance journey has an element of ritual."

Aquatic bodywork

My aquatic bodywork session with Dariya was something of a revelation, given that it's been ten years since my last (and only) experience. The session required little more of me than to simply surrender my body into Dariya's arms, as I was cradled, moved, stretched and gently massaged in warm water. In this modality, the body is floating and not fighting gravity, which frees up the joints and muscles so the body can release tension more easily. This approach claims to prompt an unwinding on many levels, into a profound state of physical and mental relaxation.

Dariya incorporates techniques of Watsu (where the receiver's face always stays above water) and underwater Liquid Flow (Dariya and her partner Daniel's co-creation, based on the many years of their learnings and teaching). Dariya studied these modalities abroad and in Auroville, and they have been offering and teaching them at Quiet Healing Centre since 2004. Dariya emphasises how, through being nurtured and unconditionally held in this kind of bodywork, receivers can expand or dissolve their boundaries, and free up the body and mind in a natural flow.

While I felt as relaxed as a puddle of jelly by the end of my session, Dariya explains that each client and session is unique, and that the effects can't be understood simply through external observation. "It's a mystery. Everybody lets go of, and lets in, as much as they're

able to be with. The therapeutic aspects of touch and physical connection in a safe space foster profound physical relaxation, and invite healing on emotional and subtler levels."

Women Temple

It's a stormy night when I head to the Butterfly Barn for the monthly Women's Temple, facilitated by Dariya. Surprisingly, 12 women brave the rain to arrive in this candle-lit rustic space. After initial prayer and bringing more aliveness to our bodies through movement and support, in groups of three we share our intimate thoughts and feelings. We are listened to without judgement, and receive positive verbal reinforcement and massage which flows into gentle contact movement.

The ritual aims to be a form of deeper awareness and awakening uniquely through women's bodies, that are more prone to cyclic ebb and flow and ongoing changes, while it also discourages "personal drama", complaints or dwelling in misery, explains Dariya. Participants are invited to enter into "deep explorations" of aspects of themselves, while opening to the wisdom inherent in each of them. And when the time is over, they are invited to drop any negativity or positivity as they "come back to now". "It's a coming back to yourself, re-learning how to hold ourselves through those more intense waves that life brings us," she says, explaining that we don't need to divide life into the mundane and spiritual; in fact, all of life is sacred.

In this ritual, Dariya implements the trainings and assistance she undertook with Chameli Ardagh and the global Awakening Women Institute. When she first came across the Awakening Women global movement ten years ago, she felt she had finally found an external confirmation of the connection that was "already alive" in her, an affinity with embodied spirituality. Her training and engagement with the movement affirmed "something much bigger: perhaps for the first time, I understood Sri Aurobindo and integral life in my own way". These experiences also gave her ways to honour connectedness in ways that are relevant to her as an evolving woman in a contemporary world.

The trainings and Dariya's own Women's Temple process use mythology, particularly goddess worship, "as maps to go inward" to facilitate spiritual awakening. Most of the Women Temple participants of this particular evening were curious younger female volunteers from other parts of India, who may already have an understanding of Indian mythology whilst also bringing "some authentic freshness", according to Dariya. However, women of all ages and backgrounds take part locally and globally in these deeply nurturing and transformative circles. "I'm really mind-blown how people give themselves to the process, no matter their age or background. We have so much more in common than we have differences. These are spaces where the being can come into place, rather than the personality."

Rituals and Mystery



Women Temple closing ritual, 2021

Dariya emphasises the importance of rituals, many of which have been "lost" in the present-day, including rituals as sacred moments of pause, of deeper listening, honouring oneself and the Earth mother, and – above all – the great mystery. Besides enlivening existing rituals, she suggests creating new rituals that "make sense to us as contemporary women and people". She has even floated the idea of starting a service in Auroville that would facilitate rituals to commemorate life transitions such as nature cycles, birthdays, transitioning into womanhood, relationships, death, or to simply honour interconnectedness and the abundance of surrounding favourable circumstances that support evolution.

Much of life is an "unfolding mystery" for Dariya. "I see that I can somehow contribute," she says about her creation of intimate therapeutic spaces that encourage flow, deepening and connection. The appearance of life as both meaningful and meaningless at different times is all part of human experience, she says, and her work aims to help people move through these recognitions.

In her own life, she feels ready for next steps and is "inviting some kind of shift" to make new directions apparent. Even in the times when she questions the purpose or continuance of her contribution to others' journeys, she is reminded at the conclusion of each Women's Temple or Dance Offering that her facilitation has significance for others. "When I see the vibrancy of people and the appreciative atmosphere at the end, it still makes sense for me to hold that space. I'm interested to explore what else is possible within this mystery of everything – what possibilities are there in Auroville? There are many people here committed to evolution, yet we are still in a kindergarten of what I imagine is possible, and the pain of that is also what propels us to change. Fortunately, there are a lot of road maps for sincere exploration."

Lesley

Population

We are living in unusual and unpredictable times. Auroville has gone through two Corona waves, and international tourists have only just this month been allowed back to India after a year and a half. Even Indian inter-state travel stopped during the height of the lockdowns. Consequently, this year's population statistics are an exception to what has been continued growth of roughly one hundred people per annum. The Entry Service office was shut for a number of months during our second wave, but in the summer they restarted processing applicants. Every week in the *News and Notes*, Aurovilians and Newcomers are announced, revealing a time lag for the many people who came here as volunteers or were already living here before they decided to enter the Newcomer process.

At the end of 2021, our population is 3286. This includes Aurovilians, Newcomers, pre-Newcomers and children. Despite the pandemic, this is still a small increase on last year's total with twenty-four new people, probably the smallest increase in Auroville's recent history. Extraordinarily, the genders are almost exactly balanced, with 1642 men and 1644 women. India continues its journey towards providing half the registered population of Aurovilians, with 1504 up from last year's number of 1475. Aside from India, the next most populous nations, France and Germany, continued to grow slightly, France by three to 459, and Germany by one to 260, whilst fourth placed Italy added four to 176. In contrast, some nations have reduced their representation a little. Korea decreased by five to fifty-two people, Belgium has

lost three to forty-three, Israeli down two to fifty, Canada now has twenty-six citizens instead of twenty-nine, and Sweden lost four to have twenty-four inhabitants. Our total of nations increased by one to 60, with the welcome addition of a resident from Sudan. For long, Auroville has been represented by inhabitants from India, Europe and North America. Over time people from Africa, South and Central America, Asia-Pacific have been slowly arriving and increasing our international diversity. As always, one wonders why Auroville is more popular with one nation than others. Could kibbutzes be a factor in why we have fifty Israeli brothers and sisters? Other than the nine Iranians, there are no other Middle Eastern nations here. And why, of the Scandinavians, are there twenty-four Swedes but only four Danes, two

Norwegians, two Finns, and – if you stretch far westward – one Icelander? There has always been a notable Francophone presence in Auroville, a legacy no doubt of The Mother and Pondicherry, which may account for the relatively large amounts of French, Swiss and Belgians (though both Belgium and Switzerland are multilingual societies). Other curious contrasts include Spain with sixty-four residents and its Iberian neighbour, Portugal, with just two. South Korea, despite its decrease to fifty-two residents, is still well represented compared to its neighbour, Japan, which has thirteen residents. What seems notable and a sign of Auroville's continuing allure is that, despite the pandemic's closure of international travel and, at times, of inter-state visitors, Auroville continues to grow.

Peter Lloyd

Total number of Auroville residents including Aurovilians, Newcomers, pre-Newcomers and their children.				
	2018	2019	2020	2021
1 INDIA	1336	1415	1475	1504
2 FRANCE	426	449	456	459
3 GERMANY	257	259	259	260
4 ITALY	162	170	172	176
5 USA	96	105	112	114
6 NETHERLANDS	104	105	105	106
7 RUSSIA	72	74	77	81
8 UK	66	67	68	67
9 SPAIN	55	60	62	64
10 SOUTH KOREA	44	55	57	52
11 ISRAEL	46	52	52	50
12 BELGIUM	41	45	46	43
13 SWITZERLAND	45	44	41	41
14 CANADA	25	27	29	26
15 SWEDEN	27	29	28	24
16 UKRAINE	21	22	22	22
17 AUSTRALIA	15	19	19	19
18 CHINA	14	16	16	16
19 JAPAN	13	14	14	13
20 SOUTH AFRICA	11	11	13	13
21 AUSTRIA	13	13	12	12
22 BRAZIL	11	11	11	12
23 HUNGARY	9	9	9	8
24 ARGENTINA	8	8	9	9
25 IRAN	6	7	9	9
26 NEPAL	7	8	7	6
27 DENMARK	4	7	7	4
28 SLOVENIA	6	6	6	6
29 MEXICO	5	6	6	6
30 COLOMBIA	4	4	5	5
31 KAZAKHSTAN	4	4	4	4
32 LATVIA	4	4	4	4
33 BELARUS	4	4	4	4
34 NORTH MACEDONIA	4	4	4	4
35 ETHIOPIA	3	3	3	3
36 SRI LANKA	3	3	3	3
37 TIBET	3	3	3	3
38 BULGARIA	2	2	2	2
39 FINLAND	2	2	2	2
40 IRELAND	2	2	2	2
41 LITHUANIA	2	2	2	2
42 NORWAY	2	2	2	2
43 PHILIPPINES	2	2	2	2
44 PORTUGAL	2	2	2	2
45 RWANDA	2	2	2	2
46 TAIWAN	2	2	2	2
47 CHILE	1	2	2	2
48 CAMBODIA	0	0	2	2
49 ECUADOR	2	2	1	1
50 ICELAND	2	1	1	1
51 ALGERIA	1	1	1	1
52 CZECHIA	1	1	1	1
53 EGYPT	1	1	1	1
54 INDONESIA	1	1	1	1
55 LUXEMBOURG	1	1	1	1
56 MOLDOVA	1	1	1	1
57 POLAND	1	1	1	1
58 ROMANIA	1	1	1	1
59 CROATIA	0	0	1	1
60 SUDAN	0	0	0	1
TOTAL RESIDENTS	3006	3173	3262	3286

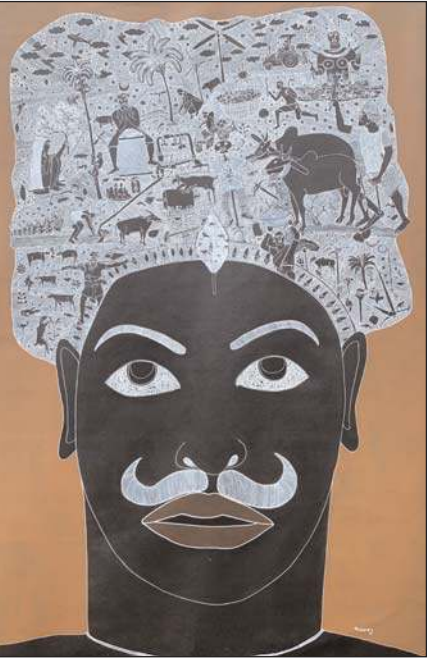
EXHIBITION

Origins

Pradeep Kumar's exhibition *Origins* was held recently at the Centre d'Art in Citadines. Pradeep Kumar might work with a mostly monochrome palette, but the first thing that strikes the viewer of his multidisciplinary artworks is their intense originality. Pradeep hails from a branch of the Lambani tribe located in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. He incorporates Lambani decorative elements and narrative forms into his artworks, but with a contemporary twist. For example, many of his pen and ink artworks are dominated by a large animal or human figure rendered in a folk art style, interwoven with finely drawn depictions of daily life in India. The latter elements have



Pradeep Kumar with artwork *Journey with Nature*.



Annadhata (Farmer) by Pradeep Kumar

something of a whimsical 'pop culture' feel, but often with a magic-realist or esoteric twist. For example, figures may be half-human, half-beast, or travelling through a dense urban landscape on a prosaic motorbike, or effortlessly airborne. Distinctions between urban and rural contexts are not always clear – scenes full of activity suggest both an earthiness and otherworldliness. The symbolism draws from a wide net, from tribal imagery and mainstream Hindu culture, to global pop culture. Some characters appear to be physically connected in ways that suggest an intimate heart connection, but is that a material device that connects them, or a strange morphing of anatomy? These are intricate works that draw the eye for deeper examination of their layered symbolism, as the viewer absorbs an intriguing depiction of the parallel existences that humans juggle in contemporary daily life: the metaphysical and the mundane. Kumar draws on, and celebrates, the deep tradition of travel that is in his culture.

The Lambani tribe originally hailed from Rajasthan, but have moved south over the centuries, with some settling in Karnataka. Kumar spends much of his time in Bangalore, and travels for exhibitions and artist residencies. For his installations, he uses objects collected on his travels or in the local environment of his artist residencies and exhibitions. In his Centre d'Art exhibition, for example, one installation included charred wood left over from a bonfire at the Matrimandir amphitheatre, which was inset with deep red seeds from a local tree. Another art piece used dried gourds hung from the ceiling. He is known to use terracotta roof tiles and slates, or found charcoal for drawing. Kumar's evocative artworks remind us that even as we get caught up in the noises and encounters of daily life, human existence can always retain the possibility of something magical or extraordinary.

Lesley

TOTAL RESIDENTS	3286
TOTAL ADULT RESIDENTS	2619
MALE	1311
FEMALE	1308
TOTAL CHILDREN	667
MALE	331
FEMALE	336

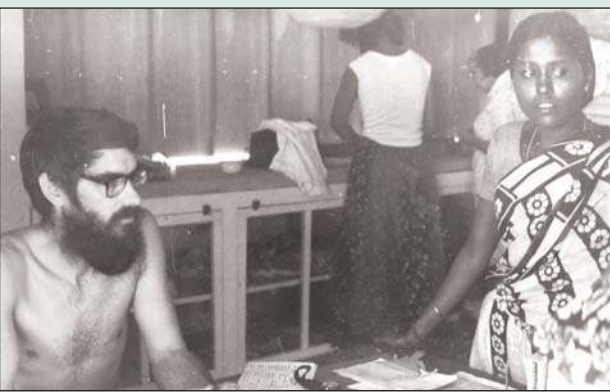
PASSING

Chellathai

J. Chellathai from Dharapuram left her body on November 3rd in Pondicherry's General Hospital at the age of 73. Having suffered a stroke last year and being diabetic, she died from a gangrene infection. Recruited from the Cuddalore Handicraft department by then Aurovilian Bryan Walton, Chellathai arrived with her mother, Mary Ponammal, in Fraternity in 1973. Being highly skilled in korai pai grass mat making, they were very welcome in Fraternity's handicrafts world and became an integrated part of the community.



Eventually Chellathai became head of Fraternity's new Korai Pai Department and trainer of some of Kuilyapalayam's youth. The mats became an important product for many Aurovilians, and even from the Ashram orders came in. In due time she married Mohan, a carpenter from Fraternity, and the father of Tixon. The whole family became part of Fraternity's handicraft set-up and went through the community's ups and downs during that time. Chellathai was the elder sister of the late Stephenraj, and lived her later years with her son Tixon and his wife Vanitha in Malarchi, a small children's boarding in New Creation. Chellathai's remains were buried at Auroville's Burial Ground on November 5th.



Bryan and Chellathai in Fraternity, 1976

Carried by the wave: growing up in a diverse community

Partha was one of the first local youngsters to join Auroville. After teaching in Auroville’s schools, he’s now part of the Working Committee, and runs Neem Tree Café.

“It was a very interesting childhood,” says Partha, about his early days. “My parents were some of the first local people to join Auroville. The local people were a little scared, wondering what all these foreigners were doing here. My grandfather was not so happy that my father took the strong decision to join.”

Partha’s parents joined Aspiration community, and his father worked on developing the Auroville land and its agricultural food processing. At that time there were about a few hundred community members, and Partha emphasises the sheer physical hard work of building the fledgling community, as well as the collaborative decision-making in the spirit of “moving forward”. “It was hard work, but the lifestyle was also fun for kids,” he recounts. “We roamed a lot, and swam in kolams and climbed trees, and we felt very free. There were hardly any cycles.” Partha went to Auroville schools and began boarding with his peers at New Creation, and would go to the beach each Sunday to play volleyball. “We were friendly with our teachers and we did adventurous things. The adults would take us jogging around the whole of Auroville, and would be behind us saying ‘run, run, run’”.

Despite the difficulties to getting a formal education in Auroville in the 1970s and early 1980s, Partha managed to finish high school, and then did a distance bachelor degree in history at Annamalai University near Chidambaram. He then undertook teacher training at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi branch, but he didn’t warm to the rigidity of the rules and schedule there, and wanted to quickly return to Auroville and its possibilities for unending education. “People learn through experience [in Auroville]”, he says. “There is vast knowledge around, and you can go anywhere and learn. The best part of learning in Auroville is the diversity. You get to learn a lot of things from each person’s culture, as they share their intelligence or knowledge. You will not get that opportunity anywhere else in the world.” He took up a role as a student assistant at Transition school, and then worked at Auroville Village Action Group. After learning *Awareness Through the Body* under the guidance of Aloka and Joan, he taught this together with Suzie, in Udavi school for seven years, as well as theatre.

While Partha’s parents had initially assumed that their future daughter-in-law would be a local Tamil girl, Partha explains with a grin that they “forgot that their son grew up in this diverse environment. But, eventually, they accepted my way of thinking.” He married Sonali, who hails from Pune, and their daughter is currently finishing her schooling and will soon start college studies. Partha explains that their daughter is a product of their diverse backgrounds and that he has moved away from many local traditions of his parents’ generation, such as “going to the temple or praying, or holding a puberty ceremony for my daughter, or marrying her at 18. I have different beliefs.”

Neem Tree café

About six years ago, Partha had a conversation with Min about starting a family-friendly café in Auroville that would provide locally-sourced food at a cheap price, a place where parents could eat and socialise while the kids played nearby, and where volunteers could work on their laptops, and people could sit and discuss, “We didn’t have a commercial motivation; we wanted to create a service-oriented social place that was beautiful and offered a diversity of food.” It soon became a very popular dining place in Auroville. The no-frills structure – a simple roof, an open space surrounded by trees, plain bench seating – lends a rustic feel to the place, and its central location is also an advantage.

Part of Min and Partha’s original vision with Mahavir, was that the café would offer food made with mostly Auroville produce. However, this hasn’t been entirely possible. While many vegetables and fruits come from Auroville farms, popular vegetables such as carrots and potatoes need to be brought in from outside. “Auroville produce is often more expensive,” says Partha, “because it’s organic.



Partha

You can get a milk for 42 rupees in the village, but it’s 64 rupees in Auroville – 22 rupees more. So, in that case, we get milk from the villages. Our tea is cheap compared to other places, so we have to balance out the organic intentions with the cost.” If he has to buy produce from outside Auroville, he tries to support local growers. “If I see a village elder selling their spinach or lemons by the side of the road, I stop and buy it, because I know they’re not putting pesticide on it.”

While Neem Tree café suffered economically during the Corona lockdowns, the café was able to carry on and is now functioning at a break-even level. The café’s point of difference – remarked upon by many – is the music playlist, which Partha curates according to the crowd each evening. “I have songs bookmarked on YouTube. If the crowd is quiet, I’ll play jazz. If it’s a Tamil crowd, I’ll play nice Tamil songs. If it’s older, I play music from their times, and suddenly they say “Oh gosh, I didn’t hear this music for 20 years! I want people to feel comfortable so they can sit for some time here, and not run back home.”

Being a Working Committee member

For the last four years, Partha has also been a member of Auroville’s Working Committee. He acknowledges that part of the job is dealing with Auroville’s “dirty laundry”, which includes disputes from labour issues to cows and land. But he points out that it’s important for people to remember the “less advertised” positive aspects of Auroville, such as its achievements over the years. “If we concentrate only on bad things, it’s an energy drainer. Auroville also needs to acknowledge the good work

it is doing, and to look forward.”

As part of his role in the Working Committee, Partha takes care of liaising with the police, which includes coordinating the visits of VIPs to Auroville. “When I was a child, I would see a policeman and get scared and run away!” he recounts. “Today, I go often to the police station to meet the police, for issues related to Auroville or Aurovilians. We have a cordial and sincere relationship. They visit Auroville and I show them around and help them understand that Auroville is a special project.”

Most of the police-related issues are day-to-day problems, such as encroachment, fence issues, theft, harassment or disputes. Partha explains how petty crime, such as bag-snatching and harassment, has reduced since Auroville introduced its own security service. He suggests that Auroville doesn’t have a significant drug problem, and that the police “can sniff if there’s a party happening locally”, which means that visitors staying in surrounding areas are sometimes caught by police for small-time drug offences. And when media report the matter, they often suggest that it took place in Auroville, says Partha, which is an unfortunate side-effect of the wider region being dubbed as ‘Auroville’.

While Auroville has developed a good working relationship with the local police over the years, Partha underlines that the community should not take advantage of this. “Once, someone borrowed my motorbike,” he narrates, “and the police caught him for talking on the phone while driving, and he didn’t have papers. So the guy called me, saying: “Anna [brother], come! The police stopped me.” So when I went, the police said, ‘Oh it’s you, it’s your bike! You’re our friend. Take your bike and go.’ But the police had also stopped other people and were giving fines. So I told them, ‘Whatever mistake he’s done, you have to give him the same fine you’re giving to other people.’ I wanted to do it correctly, because it’s not fair for the other guys standing there who have to pay a fine. For me, a rule is a rule, so we paid the fine. The other people standing there should not think that I’m taking advantage of my connection to the police officers.”

In the last decade, Partha has been involved in two groups formed by Tamil Aurovilians that aimed to develop Auroville and bring Tamil people “into the mainstream of Auroville”: the initial group Aurosangaman, and its offshoot Auromumpty. “Friends of mine were involved, and we wanted to bring change to Auroville,” he says. The groups worked to get Tamil Aurovilians elected onto working groups, in order to reflect the makeup of Auroville’s population and in the belief that “some specific tasks in working groups can only be done by Tamil Aurovilians,” says Partha, “because of our local knowledge.” He explains that village panchayat leaders and police “relate better to Tamil people”, so it’s essential that a Tamil Aurovilian is part of

such meetings in order to do “the laundry work”.

Auromumpty, however, disbanded last year. “The Auroville Council felt that there’s no need for group-based organisation in Auroville,” explains Partha. “We later realised that promotion of one group is not needed, as it’s a diverse population. We’re all here to learn from each other, to achieve something together. Mother talked about human unity; we shouldn’t get caught in petty politics or differentiate between Tamil, north Indian, whatever. Of course, there are expectations – people say ‘You’re Tamil, you should be helping me’. And there can be conflicts. I have to be neutral and not think just of individuals. I look at the larger issue and what is best for Auroville. I have to follow my own heart and conscience.”

The work of the Working Committee has long been known to be demanding, but the work has increased even more with the arrival of the new Secretary and new Governing Board. “A lot of things are changing, and change is happening fast. Some new energy is there. The Governing Board wants to see us grow fast. The Board says that we’ve had 50 years and we’re only at 3,000 population. And they want to see Auroville as a completed city. Maybe some fault lies within ourselves. Maybe we have been too slow to realise a city, and that gave them the wrong signal. And they’re saying ‘enough is enough’. But how can that sit with Auroville’s approach to governance? Society can change only with the residents. If you want to bring changes, without the support of the residents, it can’t happen. There will always be some unhappiness. But we should be given the opportunity to come to an agreement to do things. There should be a balance between the expectations of the Governing Board and the Residents. For me, the two approaches should mingle, it shouldn’t be too slow or fast. It’s an interesting phase of Auroville.”

So how does it feel being in the Working Committee at this pressurised point in time? “It’s like being a drum: we get beaten from both sides! We’re told we have to push things, but we cannot agree amongst ourselves in the Working Committee: we have diverse views on issues. But none of us has a personal interest – everyone is fighting for what they think is best for Auroville.”

With another two years to go in his Working Committee role, Partha takes a philosophical view of his future. “I’ve always floated along with the wave, whichever way it carries me. Things happen and I don’t regret that I didn’t do certain things. Life takes you along; just go along with it. And you get to learn and take the opportunity to grow along the way.

“I’m nearing my 50s, and slowly I’ll have to find somebody to train for the roles I’ve held. The Working Committee needs more young people – for there should be experience and also young energy. I will share my experience with young people.”

Lesley

AWARDS

Green Solutions Award for Suhasini

During the recently concluded COP 26 climate summit in Glasgow, Suhasini Ayer, long term Aurovilian and an architect, was honoured with a Green Solutions award in the Sustainable Construction category for her work with the Humanscapes Habitat youth housing project in Auroville. [featured in *AV Today* #340 November 2017, eds] The Green Solutions Awards 2020-2021 is an international competition organised by the Construction21 network, which describes itself as ‘a collaborative and networking platform for sustainability stakeholders, that recognises exemplary solutions integrated into buildings, districts, and infrastructures that contribute to the fight against climate change’. 192 candidates from around the world competed in the competition.

At the award ceremony during the climate summit, Humanscapes was described as a “very inspirational Indian housing project with a social vision and low-tech sustainability.”

In her acceptance speech, Suhasini thanked Construction21 and explained the significance of the award. “One of the reasons we participated in Construction21 awards was that it’s very inspirational to see a Government, private and public participation, as in India there is a big difference in world views between the government and private sector when it comes to development.

“Our project is about how to use designs to bring together the socio-cultural, the environmental and technological aspects. In India we have challenges which in terms of numbers are quite mind boggling. Everybody wants to develop. You can tell us about 1.5 degrees [increase in temperature], you can tell us about carbon footprint, but there are a billion people who want their standard of living to go up, and they want: housing, energy, cars, roads and cities. Our challenge is to show that you don’t need to follow the standards of the developed world, but actually find our own pathway. That’s what Humanscapes is about and what makes it a replicable model.”



Suhasini at her acceptance speech

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