

The Auroville Festival in Chennai

On March 1st, 2015, the Auroville Festival in Chennai was launched at the ITC Grand Chola by the Governor of Tamil Nadu, His Excellency Dr. K. Rosaiah, in the presence of the former Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, dignitaries of the Tamil Nadu Government, representatives of Auroville's Governing Board and International Advisory Council and Aurovilians. It was the beginning of a month-long programme which included seminars, lectures, art exhibitions, exhibitions of commercial products and a cultural festival, held in venues all over Chennai.

How it all began

"This has a long history," says Divya, who along with Fabienne and Elaine of Outreach Media and Krishna, Mariana and Marco from Auroville Arts Service, has been the driving force behind the Festival. "The idea originated from Mr. Bala Baskar, the former Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. He observed that Auroville is not sufficiently connected to Chennai and said something should be done about it. Then, in March 2013, Auroville's musical *Sorcery at Sea* happened. He enthusiastically proposed that Auroville should bring this production to Chennai, together with a seminar. Paul Blanchflower, the organiser of the musical, regretfully declined – it would be too much to bring the entire cast and all the props to Chennai, he said.

"We continued brainstorming. We wanted to bring a seminar and a cultural show to Chennai, along with a few events, but which one? One idea that came up was that the Genius Brothers could make a skit on Auroville, called 'What is Auroville?', a motto we'd copied from Christine Bernard's book *What is this Auroville?*. The skit never materialised, but the title stuck and was later adopted as the slogan of *The Auroville Festival in Chennai*.



The outdoor exhibition on Auroville at the Lalit Kala Akademi with a flower arrangement by Pala

"Mr. Bala Baskar kept pushing us. At his request, we prepared a 5-6 lakhs budget for a small programme; he suggested we increase the budget and then he brought it to the Chairman. But as the Indian elections were on the anvil, the festival was postponed.

"Post election, in June-July 2014, just before he left office, Mr. Bala Baskar revived the concept, this time together with people from the Auroville Arts Service and Outreach Media. They decided to expand it. Auroville Arts Service brought the idea of many art exhibitions all over Chennai; Outreach Media came up with the proposal to organize seminars and lectures and have a large cultural event. As we wanted members of the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council to participate, it was decided to have the Chennai festival at the time of their half-yearly meetings in March."

The aim: person-to-person connections

"We all felt that this festival should aim at making person-to-person connections to strengthen existing relationships and develop new ones, with people from Auroville reaching out to people from Chennai in all kinds of manifestations," says Mariana. "But how could that happen? After long discussions we decided that, contrary to the 2012 Auroville Festival New Delhi which had been organized by a few people, this time the organization should be



His Excellency Dr. K. Rosaiah, Governor of Tamil Nadu, launches the Auroville Festival at the ITC Grand Chola

decentralised, with individual Aurovilians or groups of Aurovilians taking responsibility for the organizing of their own event. Outreach Media and Auroville Arts Service would just be the networking hub. And as 'What is Auroville' means different things to different people, there was no restriction on what people could bring."

"That's how it became big," says Marco. "Though there was a slow response in the beginning, it grew exponentially. The ethical market people came forward and chose an upmarket shop in Chennai to exhibit and sell the products of about 12 commercial units; Auroville Arts Service published the catalogue *Art of Auroville*, portraying 20 Auroville artists, and contacted all the private and public galleries in Chennai to find locations for Auroville artists to exhibit their works, after which the gallery owners together with the artists took care of the organization of the exhibition and the invitations; and Outreach Media conceptualised the seminars and the cultural event, which, the team decided, must be a performance of the children's and adults choirs in view of their quality, multiple nationalities and the age diversity of the choir members. In all, more than 30 events were organized."

"I had been wondering if this type of organization would be possible," says Krishna. "To organize a festival in a non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian way with over 300 different people doing their own thing, would it work? It was an eye opener that this was possible. Each event I went to proved to me that when everybody does their part with commitment, it works out."

"Another important actor of the Festival was the graphic designer, Aurrinã, who did all the graphics: logo, banners, programme, flyers, invitation cards, posters, art catalogue and the press kit," says Fabienne. "We also decided to hire a Public Relations (PR) company to make sure that all events would be properly reported in the media. We wanted to inform the officials and population of Chennai of what was happening during the Festival, and in this way, create awareness about Auroville. Outreach Media organized a press conference and worked closely with the PR company and fed them information. It proved to be a good decision. There was a good PR outreach, particular in the newspapers, but to a lesser extent by Tamil Nadu radio and television, as too few people in Auroville can

speak the pure Tamil required for radio and television interviews.

What worked, what didn't?

"That's a difficult question to answer," says Krishna. "It depends on what you define as 'worked'. If we look at the art exhibitions, I would say they have been very successful. All the galleries we contacted immediately opened their doors. The private gallery owners were very interested to sell works of Auroville artists and many expressed their hopes that they could build long-lasting partnerships. Lalit Kala Akademi and DakshinaChitra, offered their spaces for free, as did also the Goethe-Institut where we held our first press conference and the National Institute of Fashion Technology NIFT, where a number of events took place. The ITC Grand Chola offered its space at a large discount.

"The events that worked best were the ones that were promoted by Chennai organizations that have an interest in that particular aspect of Auroville. For example, reStore, an organic food store in Kottivakkam,

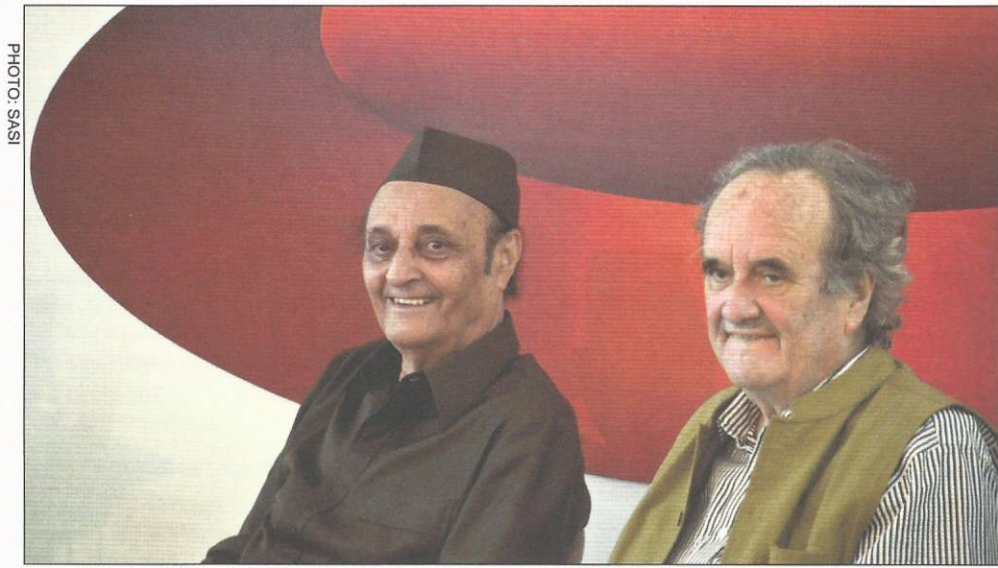
created *Giftival* together with Auroville's Sadhana Forest – a place for sharing books, crafts and skills including vegan organic health snacks. They have their own emailing list and the event was a huge success. A similar success was the public discussion on *Seeds, Freedom & Sustainability*, organized by Samanvaya and the Organic Farmers Market with the big three people in organic farming in India: Aurovilian Bernard Declercq, Claude Alvarez – the founder of the Organic Farming Association, India – and Sultan Ismail, the Director of the Eco-Science Foundation. But there have also been instances where the host or the organizer had not sufficiently promoted the event, leading to poor attendance such as at Norman's performance of *My Burning Heart* and the workshop *Ko Kona Lam* by Grace.

"The seminars worked out well, in particular the seminar Towards a Sustainable Future held at the Kasturi Srinivasan Hall of the Music Academy, where five TED-Talk style presentations were given by Aurovilians, followed by a panel discussion," says Sheba, who, together with Leena, had helped Divya and Fabienne organize the event. "Senior officials from the Tamil Nadu Government and Industry attended, but the audience consisted primarily of students and faculty of advanced places of learning, such as IIT Chennai, Anna University, the Hindu University, the MEASI Academy of Architecture and the Sathyabama University. Their engagement was intense. Some of the questions were provocative and challenging, but overall, the responses were very positive and some of the speakers have since been asked to speak on other occasions."

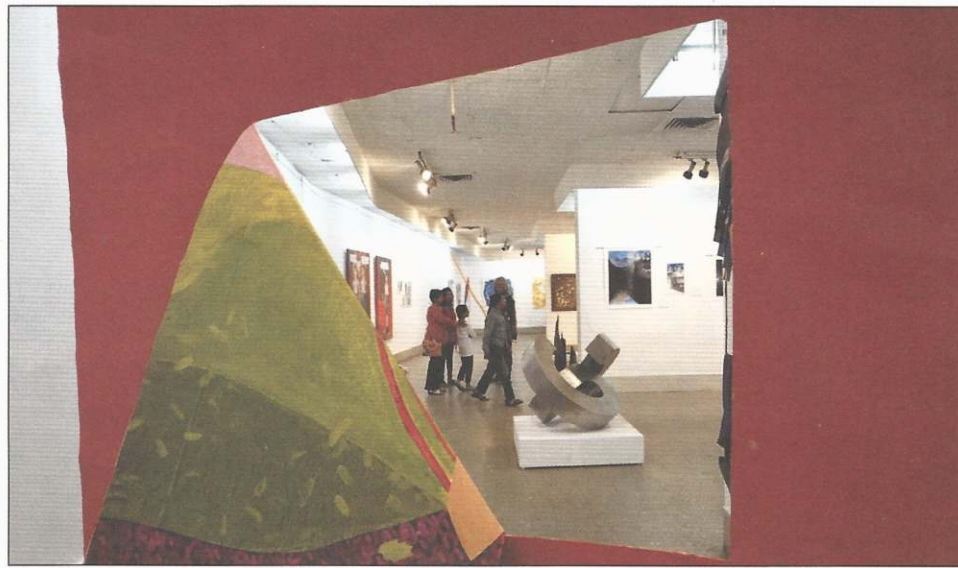
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The Auroville choirs performance at the MKV Hall, Chennai



Dr. Karan Singh and Sir Mark Tully at the Lalit Kala Akademi in front of a painting by Henk



Part of the exhibition at Lalit Kala Akademi, view through an artwork by Audrey

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"The success was also due to a lot of preparation," adds Leena. "In the weeks prior to the event, we had been very busy visiting many faculty heads and issuing invitations to them and their students, and we followed them up with phone calls and emails. The event concluded with a successful networking lunch at Savera Hotel. Sir Mark Tully expressed the next morning that he was particularly happy with this seminar as it was a successful example of how Auroville events need to be showcased."

"The lack of adequate preparation might well be responsible for the very limited attendance at the choir performance," reflects Krishna. "The latter is the major event that did not work as expected. We had hired the SMVR Concert Hall, which has a seating

capacity of 1 200, but hardly a 100 people showed up. It wasn't because western classical music is not well-known in Chennai – quite a lot of people are involved in western classical music and Chennai has a few church choirs and music schools. It was rather that none of these had been invited." "On hindsight, it might have been better if we had linked the Festival inauguration with the cultural event," says Divya. "But I was impressed that none of the kids or adults expressed any disappointment at the small audience. They gave their best performance ever. I was very proud of them!"

The lectures about *Auroville: a multicultural society for the development of human unity* at Lalit Kala Akademi given by the Chairman of Auroville Foundation Dr. Karan Singh, and IAC members Sir Mark Tully and Dr. Vishakha Desai and others, aimed at informing consuls, honorary consuls, and people from the 'art world'. It was by invitation, and not open to the general public. The location for the lectures, given in the same exhibition hall where 20 Auroville artists were displaying their work, was however not really suitable for lectures. The superb multi-cultural foods prepared by Auroville's cooks for the occasion made up for this.

What's next?

"Good question," says Divya. "For the time being, we are breathing out, for these have been extremely intense weeks for all involved. We will soon call for feedback from all participants. But it is already clear that this Auroville Festival is only the beginning."

"One large gain has been that now we have a consolidated list of all the important people in Chennai, which was not available before," says Fabienne. "This list has to be kept updated and will be used for future events in Chennai. Perhaps these will not be as large as the Auroville Festival – but they will definitely be far more

regular. For we plan to remain on the Chennai platform."

"And we want to create more regular interaction with officials from the Tamil Nadu Government," adds Divya. "We want to invite them for an event in Auroville such as a conference on sustainability, with top quality speakers from India, Auroville and abroad, with a sightseeing tour and a cultural event. Perhaps later this year or in 2016."

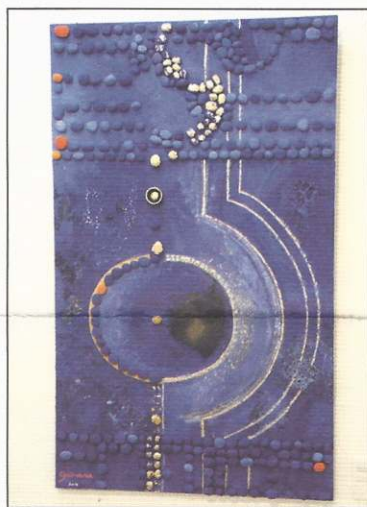
Is any impact on Auroville expected from the Festival? "Probably yes," says Marco. "The more you inform people about Auroville, the more you can expect people to come and visit. Today, most visitors see only the Visitors' Centre and the Matrimandir, but most likely this limitation will not continue. Also in this sense, the Festival has brought new challenges."

In conversation with Carel

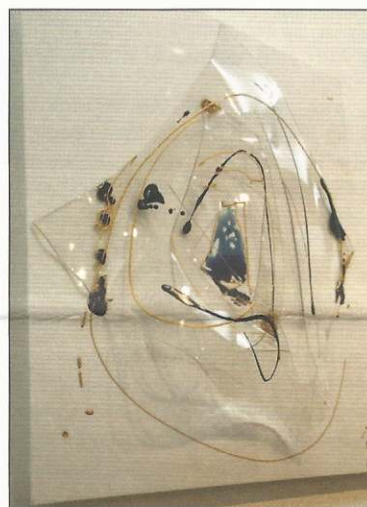
For more information visit www.festival.auroville.org



Ceramics by Ange Peter



Installation by Chantal Gowa



Painting on Acrylic by Nele



Exhibition of Auroville Papers



Graphics by Aurrima

Auroville Festival in Chennai - Overview of events

Events, exhibitions

Choir Concert by the Auroville Children's and Adults choirs at Sri Mukta Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall, with a selection of classical and contemporary pieces.

Ceramic Connect at the Indian Korean Cultural Centre with works from Supriya Menon Meneghetti, Priya Sundaravalli, Rakhee Kane, Angad Vohra and Adil Writer.

Kratu's Ceramic Sculptures at Studio Palazzo with ceramic artwork of Kratu.

Codes at DakshinaChitra with paintings by Ail Writer and Marco Feira.

Auroville United at Artworld-Sarala's Art Centre, with paintings, photography, sculpture and ceramics by Adil Writer, Ange Peter, Charudatta Ram Prabhudesai, Emanuele Scanziani, Lalie Sorbet, Ireno Guerci, Marie-Claire Barsotti, Miki Mccarty and Torkil Dantzer.

Simply Complex with paintings by Pierre Legrand.

Ceramic, painting and sculpture at Gallery Veda, with ceramics, painting and sculptures by Rakhee Kane and Nele Martens.

Sculptured Was Candles at Gallery Veda with wax candles sculptures by Paul Pinthon.

What is Auroville Papers at Focus Art Gallery with cotton maché products of Auroville Papers.

What is Auroville at Lalit Kala Akademi with texts and photographs on the Dream and Charter of Auroville and mixed media art installations by Adil Writer, Audrey Wallace-Taylor, Aurrima Maréchal, Birgitta Volz, Cecilia Cortès, Chantal Gowa, Chloé Sanchez, Jürgen Putz, Lalie Sorbet, Michel Hutin, Monique Patenaude, Nele Martens, Okjeong Lee, Pierre Legrand, Priya Sundaravalli, Rakhee Kane, Oorothumkandy Ramesh and Supriya Menon Meneghetti.

Four expressions from Auroville at Apparao Gallery with stainless steel sculpture by Henk van Putten and ceramics from Priya Sundaravalli, Adil Writer and Anamika Borst.

Architectural Works of Mona Doctor-Pingel and Poppo Pingel. Photo exhibition at the School of Architecture and Planning of the Anna University.

Markets and Bazaar

Giftival, at ReStore, presented by and with ReStore. Sharing of saplings, books, crafts, vegan organic healthy snacks, and irrigation bottles. Also book readings and a cooking workshop.

Auroville Ethical Market at The Folly, Amethyst, with Auroville commercial units selling books, food, furniture, sound solutions, paper products, jewellery, hammocks, clothing and more.

Auroville Crafts at DakshinaChitra.

Lectures, readings, seminars, workshops

Integral Yoga at Spaces, Film and discussion by Manoj Pavitrana.

My Burning Heart at the National Institute of Fashion Technology NIFT, performance of an adaptation of the book on Satprem *My Burning Heart* by F. de Towarnicki, by Norman Bowler.

Introduction to Medical Clowning at Sundaravadanan Hospital by Komali MeDi Clown Academy, Auroville.

Presentation on Organic Cotton and sustainable fashion at NIFT.

Presentation on Conscious Business and Spirituality in a Fashion Enterprise in South Korea at NIFT by Shreen Raghavan and Kala Shreen.

Presentation of four social start-ups at NIFT by UnLtd Tamil Nadu.

Introduction to Presencing at NIFT by UnLtd Tamil Nadu.

Celebrating Womenhood at NIFT with a debate on Women's Empowerment and Enterprise and a presentation on Revaluing menstruation ... because life depends on it, by KathyWalking of Eco Femme.

Towards a Sustainable Future at Kasturi Srinivasan Hall, TED-Talk presentations by five Aurovilians followed by a panel discussion on water, waste, energy and habitat.

Awareness through the Body at Simply Living, conducted by Amir Azulya.

Ko Kona Lam at Spaces, a workshop on drawing kolams and a dance performance by Grace Gitadelila.

Ajit Kouljagi Memorial Lecture at DakshinaChitra Heritage Museum by architect Benny Kuriakose.

Know your waste, at ReStore by WasteLess. This included a visit to the Kodangaiyur waste dump, an interaction with a waste dump affected community and various films and demonstrations.

Auroville: A multi-cultural Centre for the Development of Human Unity at Lalit Kala Akademi with lectures by Dr. Karan Singh, Sir Mark Tully, Dr. Vishakha Desai, Jyoti Eri for One Asia and Eric Clapton for the African Pavilion.

Clean Lab at Arsha Vidya Mandir School by WasteLess.

Seeds, Freedom and Sustainability at Organic Farmers Market, talk and interaction with Bernard Declercq, Claude Alvarez, the founder of the Organic Farming Association, India, and Sultan Ismail, the Director of the Eco-Science Foundation.

Identity and Conflict at Simply Living. Workshop on conflict by Elvira Klein and Jörg Zimmerman.

A New Town Development Authority for Auroville?

At the end of February, the New Town Development Task Force made a presentation of its work to the community. They explained that, following last year's recommendations of the Land Protection Status Study Group and the Working Committee, the Task Force has started a dialogue with the Town and Country Planning Office (TCPO) of Tamil Nadu to discuss the possibility of the Government of Tamil Nadu constituting a New Town Development Authority (NTDA) for the Auroville township – based on the Master Plan and upon Auroville's values – under the Tamil Nadu Town and Planning Act.

This initiative was spurred by the fact that outsiders are planning large real estate projects within the Master Plan area that have no relation to the Plan and threaten its integrity, and that uncontrolled village development is also compromising efforts that Auroville has made over the years to integrate Auroville and village development.

The powers of a New Town Development Authority have been defined in the Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Act. After such an Authority is established, a detailed development plan will have to be made for the area, which, in the case of Auroville, should be the Auroville Master Plan. Once this plan is approved by the NTDA, all planning and development approvals on the land under its jurisdiction would have to comply with the approved detailed development plan, irrespective of who owns the land.

The Task Force explained that this status would formalise recognition of the Auroville international township and confirm the Master Plan as the reference document for all future development within the Master Plan area.

However, it noted that the Master Plan and the detailed development plan would be subject to public review and the NTDA might integrate requests by non-Aurovilians for alteration of the proposed detailed development plan. Furthermore, Auroville may not be represented on the membership of the constituted Authority as the nomination of

its members would rest with the Tamil Nadu government.

The Task Force pointed out that the Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Office has a statutory right over planning and land development and is entitled to propose at any time its own Master Plan for Auroville. By collaborating with this Office, Auroville has a good chance of having its own Master Plan used for the constitution of the NTDA. It is the role of the Task Force to guarantee that this new planning authority for Auroville will be delivered on these terms only.

Auroville's Town Development Council has submitted a memorandum in November, 2014, defining the aims and goals of the proposed NTDA. The matter is now under discussion with various officials of the Tamil Nadu Government. A site inspection of the area covered by the proposed NTDA is planned to take place shortly, with all the officials involved.

Responses

While Aurovilians attending the meeting appreciated the work of the Task Force, given the magnitude of the threats to the integrity of the land in the city area and green belt, a number of questions were raised and concerns expressed. The biggest concern, of course, is that Auroville could lose control over its own planning and development. For example, is it possible that the new Authority could allow villagers owning land in the city to construct big buildings on their land?

The reply was that once the NTDA has been constituted and if the Master Plan is adopted as the basis of the development plan, then the Auroville Master Plan would be enforceable. It would not prevent non-Aurovilians developing their land but they would have to comply with the development plan.

But what about flexibility? Not everybody is happy with the present Master Plan. Would the creation of an NTDA mean the Master Plan would be set in stone, impossible to change?

One member of the Task Force conceded that any planning document, like the Auroville Master Plan, that had

been drawn up 20 years ago would need changes. The NTDA must recognise the evolutionary nature of Auroville and of the Auroville Master Plan itself, and allow for constant changes. "It is not up to the NTDA to step in and say that there was a road here so we insist that this road is built. That much assurance we must have. As I see it, if we do not feel that we are going to be permitted that kind of freedom then there is no point in entering into this kind of arrangement."

A member of the Advisory Group of our Town Development Council (TDC) added that Auroville's Master Plan explicitly mentions that the Plan is only a flexible framework, and that every five years a detailed development plan has to be developed, taking into account the experience gained in the previous five years. Moreover, our Master Plan defines the prescribed authority, and that is our Town Development Council. "So if the NTDA accepts Auroville's Master Plan, it has to accept it in total, including the process by which development plans are made and approved in Auroville."

The NTDA is a regulating body, it is only there to assist in implementation, clarified another member of the Task Force. It cannot impose any development, it cannot force Auroville to make a road just because it is in the Master Plan. He felt that the NTDA is our best option at present. "The Tamil Nadu Government itself, which understands our predicament very well, is telling us this. An even better option would be to become a Special Development Authority. But this is not possible in Tamil Nadu at present. If this does become possible we should follow that option, but this may take many years and would need the support of all the political parties, so in the meantime we should pursue NTDA status."

The NTDA is not a silver bullet, admitted another member of the Task Force. "It will not protect us one hundred percent from unwanted development. All it would do is to recognise the Master Plan and to create the detailed development plan that defines what can be built where and how." The best protection would be if Auroville bought all

the land necessary for the project of Auroville, but that seems out of reach at present.

Another Task Force member added that once the NTDA is in place, all large developments beyond our control in the Master Plan area will be stopped, and it is likely that land prices will come down because developers will not be able to speculate.

The constitution of the NTDA

Of course, if Aurovilians were represented on the new Authority, there would be more confidence in the future actions of an NTDA. So why may Aurovilians not be on it?

It was explained that while the Tamil Nadu Government may nominate some people who are close to Auroville, as the NTDA will not only cover the Auroville township but also some of the villages that interface with Auroville area, it would be better if Aurovilians were not part of this new system. The NTDA has to be perceived as a neutral, objective Tamil Nadu government body that is for the benefit not only of Auroville, but also of the whole region.

Then who will be on the NTDA asked someone? If they are local politicians, isn't there a danger they will listen more to their constituents, their voters, than to the Aurovilians?

There are eight members in an NTDA, all of which are appointed by the Tamil Nadu Government, was the reply. Three are ex-officio members, including the local MLA and the Chairman of the Local Planning Authority. However, we can ask the Government to nominate people of national status who have Auroville in their hearts.

"It is true", admitted a member of the TDC Advisory Group, "that the moment you deal with governments and bureaucracies there are grey areas. What is hopeful, however, is that most of these authorities are not proactive but reactive. You go to them with your plan for approval. They do not come with their own plans."

The community process

At this point, questions about the community process were raised. "This

sounds like a done deal," complained someone, noting that the residents had never been asked if they approved of Auroville adopting the NTDA option.

A member of the Task Force replied that there had been three general meetings on the topic last year, and the Status Study Group had published a report on the Intranet, following which the Town Development Council had constituted this Task Force.

But holding general meetings is not getting approval from the community, observed somebody else. The Task Force was put together to study this issue, not to implement it. Now the Task Force should give its recommendation to the community, provide all the relevant information and then the Residents Assembly should decide whether or not it wants to take this route.

In fact, an earlier communication to the community from the Status Study Group had explicitly said that a Residents' Assembly should endorse the final proposal. But a member of the TDC Advisory Group cautioned against a prolonged collective decision-making process. "I strongly recommend to this meeting, I mean the last word is with the Residents Assembly, but not again to go through a one or two-year process of consultations because the outside world is developing at top speed. So give this idea a chance knowing that it is not perfect and leaving space for grace."

Not everyone was convinced. "You are just going forward on goodwill with a lot of hope that it will go the right way and it can easily go the wrong way. Nobody is addressing what could happen if it goes the wrong way," observed someone.

What next? In the *News and Notes* of 28th March, 2015, the Auroville Council stated that they are studying a community process concerning the NTDA proposal. The issue is complex. The development threats we are facing are huge, yet there are major uncertainties and risks surrounding the NTDA option. Hopefully, the community can make a wise and expeditious decision after it has been presented with the best information available in a way that can be easily understood.

Alan

COMMUNITY REFLECTION

Auroville's youth explore a better future



A young boy stood at the table, his pencil hovering over his paper, his mind searching for what to write. He had spun a colourful wheel in the "Quality Game" at the Festival of Ideas held on Mother's birthday, February 21, and had landed on the word, "Courage". The moderator of the game said, "OK, now: how do we increase the presence of courage in Auroville?" The boy thought for a moment and then looked up. "What does courage mean?" Once the moderator gave his thought, the boy turned to his paper and fervently scribbled his idea.

This was one of many opportunities young people had to share their thoughts and inspirations on how to move closer to Auroville's ideals. The Festival of Ideas, held on February 21, aimed at bringing together Auroville youth around one question: based on Auroville's ideals, how can we make Auroville better?

The topic of youth was included in the Retreat in the hope of bridging the gap currently felt between the older people in working groups and the young people of Auroville, defined as between ages 15-25.

In the past, there have been challenges of communication between these groups, but these difficulties are increasingly being bridged by the discovery that both share the same concerns and interests for a better Auroville.

For the Auroville Retreat, youth were encouraged to share practical solutions for the development of our community. This brainstorming started with a few individuals visiting schools like Last School, New Era Secondary School, Udavi, and Future School. Then all schools in the region were invited to participate in two brainstorming sessions at the Youth Centre campus. What resulted from these forums was the idea for a larger, community-wide event, which took on the name "Festival of Ideas". The event took place at the Youth Centre and was attended by all age groups who came to share their time and genius in positive collaboration for building a better community.

At the entrance of the festival, various booths were set up for them to share their ideas through a variety of colourful games, with names like, "Solve a Problem!" or "Things You Like". There was also a

poetry competition, live music, the Farmer's Market, a flying fox zipline, and a Garbage Art Competition.

Throughout it all, youth walked around the event talking and handing out sheets to the visitors to collect ideas. There were many suggestions, such as the creation of an Auroville Youth Council, with a budget, that would represent and support the youth for many generations to come. Other concerns touched many urgent issues facing youth, such as housing, employment, maintenance, gift economy, higher education, internships, and security, relationship with the villages, and relationship to the world. The entire list of ideas emerging from these discussions was compiled by a handful of youth ambassadors and presented at the Auroville Retreat in March.

The Festival was different. Firstly, it was planned by and for Auroville youth. Also, instead of allowing space for complaints and frustrations, the organizers used games, music and art to focus on the dreams and direct manifestation of Auroville's ideals. The atmosphere was one of celebration and possibility.

Kavitha and Ing-Marie

The Youth Presentation

At an open meeting for the community on 28th March, the youth made the presentation that they had delivered earlier at the Retreat.

They began by defining their overall goal – to recognize the potential in youth and support their involvement in the development of Auroville – and then listed their four most important sub-goals:

1. Involve youth in creating enough housing for different youth age groups and different youth needs.
2. Support student's educational needs by connecting schools, ideas, cultures and individuals.
3. Create space and job opportunities for young Aurovilians to express themselves through work.
4. Have a functioning Auroville Youth Resource Team by the end of the year.

Among a long list of things they want to do or want to happen was that all Working Groups put a chair aside for any interested youth as silent observers/interns/working members, and that all youth housing projects should involve youth in their discussions. They would also like to have older mentors to help guide youth when requested to do so. The meeting ended with the youth requesting older Aurovilians who were willing to be mentors to fill out forms. On these forms they were invited to specify in which areas they would be willing to mentor youth, and they were asked to make a time commitment.

It is not often that Auroville meetings combine so effectively high idealism with good, confident communication and clear-sighted objectives. The youth are showing us the way.

The Auroville Retreat

The Auroville Retreat, which took place on 12th and 13th March, brought together members of the International Advisory Council (IAC), the Governing Board (GB) and around 160 Aurovilians to examine the present state of Auroville and to draft an action plan for the near future.

It was the culmination of two months of intense work, involving around 300 Aurovilians and 35 thematic work sessions. The original idea came from members of the International Advisory Council. They noted that, over the years, the Governing Board and the Advisory Council had received comments from some Aurovilians about what they perceived to be chronic blockages to our development. The Retreat seemed a good way to test the truth of these perceptions, to identify where the blockages lie and to plot a new way forward.

The stated objectives of the Retreat were: to reconnect and engage with the Auroville vision and its manifestation; to reflect on Mother's vision for Auroville; to introspect and reflect on the spiritual growth of individuals and the collective; to reflect on the present realities of Auroville; and to envision where Auroville wants to be on its 50th anniversary (in 2018) and in 10 years.

The original idea was to focus simply upon governance. During conversations between members of the Governing Board, the IAC and the Vision Task Force this was expanded to include five key areas of Auroville's life: governance, land and planning, growth, education and the economy. However, when it was noticed that youth and the bioregion were under-represented in the preparatory groups, these two areas were also added.

The process

The preparation of the Retreat can be divided into four main phases. For the first phase, a resource group was formed in each of five main areas listed above. Over a period of three weeks, each group met four times for three-hour sessions. They formulated the key values relating to their area, examined the present reality, identified the main challenges and then came up with insights that could provide new directions towards manifesting these values.

To allow the widest participation, virtual support groups were set up by the Residents Assembly Service to allow all Auroville residents to comment and provide inputs to the resource groups.

After four sessions, each resource group had come up with around 15 to 20 insights concerning their area. To understand the interconnectedness and possible interdependencies, a half-day session was organized during which the insights of each resource group were shared with all the other area groups.

The next step was to translate these insights into goals and 'milestones' that are measurable and able to be completed within a specified time-frame. To achieve this, a further one day session was organized for each area. The 3-5 major goals, with their associated milestones and timelines, formulated at each of these sessions served as source material for the Retreat.

Meanwhile, the bioregion and youth groups had been working separately. Two short meetings of the bioregion group led to a day-long session during which more than 40 participants drafted a dozen insights. The youth held some preparatory meetings which led to them putting on a "Festival of Ideas" at the Youth Centre, attended by more than 200 people.

The insights of these two groups were also fed into the Retreat process so that their priorities could be included in the drafting of the final goals and milestones.



PHOTO: DON

Aromar Revi guiding a plenary session

The Retreat

The drafting happened during the two-day Retreat itself. The Retreat began with the chief facilitator, Aromar Revi, Director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, laying out the purpose of the Retreat. Then the facilitators of each area presented to the plenary the conclusions of their group, along with the facilitators' observations about the process. The youth also made a well-received presentation of their own.

Then participants were divided into small area groups (with participants from the bioregion and youth invited to join one of the other area groups, depending upon their interest). They were asked to focus on a few critical milestones and think about how they could be implemented. Afterwards, the small groups from the same area came together and agreed upon their three most important milestones, or the ones they felt were the most immediately doable.

The next day further steps were taken towards the concrete implementation of milestones. Initially, some individuals from each area group met to identify one milestone from their area to be implemented. They then framed its 'terms of reference'. This involved examining in detail the change that was sought to be made, what was needed to achieve it (including the human resources required) and how progress towards achieving this milestone would be monitored. This simulated the post-Retreat work that would be necessary to realize each milestone.

Each area group then presented their chosen milestone with its terms of reference to the plenary. At this point, Aromar Revi noted that some of the main challenges to their implementation were the 'elephants in the room' that nobody wanted to talk about. He proceeded to read out, to enthusiastic applause, a list of these elephants along with their possible syntheses that had been prepared by members of the Retreat Organization Team [see page 5].

After lunch, a few area groups were asked to present their milestones and answer testing questions from members of Auroville working groups to see how well they could defend their plans. Every participant in the Retreat was also invited to indicate which milestones they would be willing to work upon.

The day ended with Aromar summarising the

proceedings and Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Governing Board, giving an uplifting speech. Noting that Auroville is at a crossroads and needs a major change – "it either breaks through or breaks down" – he observed that he had never seen Aurovilians in a better mood and felt there was a new energy to move forward. And he promised that once the Governing Board received the concrete proposals drafted in the Retreat, "we will do whatever it takes to see that the breakthrough occurs".

The Retreat concluded with the beautiful haunting tones of Chandra's flute.

Post-Retreat

After the Retreat, the organizing group made a presentation to the Governing Board. It noted some of the goals and milestones arrived at for each topic area, along with the less tangible benefits of the Retreat, and suggested a way of changing our work culture and behaviour.

Subsequently, the organizing group met with the Working Committee. The organizers stated that the group would be dissolving itself after they had completed their report as their work was finished. It was discussed that while the Governing Board and Vision Task Force would retain an overview function, the Working Committee would be the holding body and ultimately accountable for the post-Retreat work, and that task groups would be formed in each topic area to work towards the implementation of the goals and milestones identified in the Retreat. It was also noted that regular evaluations of the progress made in all topic areas would be necessary.

Insights

The Retreat was undoubtedly a major event. It involved a large part of the active community and gained wide general acceptance, a rare occurrence in this community. The many insights and ideas generated during the preparation sessions and during the Retreat itself were often creative as well as challenging, and they can be mined for many years to come (a full report of preparatory sessions and the Retreat can be accessed at ras.auroville.org.in/retreat2015). It was particularly interesting to hear from groups like the youth and those from the bioregion, for the voices of these sectors of our society are often not heard or are distorted.

The youth, for example, mentioned that the way they are perceived in the community has to change: "We are not here to complain but to work with you". They requested apprenticeship and mentoring programmes, as well as affordable housing, to allow them to fulfil a more active role in the community, and they plan to set up an Auroville Resource Team as an intermediary between youth who want to be active and the working groups.

One of the main goals defined by the bioregion group was to include sustainable bioregional perspectives in all our development plans. They pointed out that Auroville and the villages have many things we can work on together (solid waste management, water, organic farming, women's empowerment, health etc.). However, Auroville should not enforce its priorities but ask the villagers what they want. In this dialogue, Aurovilians from

the local bioregion can play a vital role: they can be the 'bridge'.

However, the bioregion group concluded that Auroville could only work successfully with the local villages if Auroville was united, if Aurovilians were living examples of the Dream, and if the attitude of 'us' and 'them' was abolished.

There were also important insights from other topic areas. The education group highlighted the need for an organization to promote further learning in the community, and to provide some form of external recognition for the Auroville education that seeks to awaken soul consciousness rather than prepare students for examinations. They defined one of the main education goals as "a learning society of constant progress guided by the emergence of the psychic towards oneness".

The economy group felt we need to develop a culture that supports innovation and diversity, and that Auroville's economy can only grow if we focus upon our core strengths – research, education, training and environment. The money-driven economy must be replaced by a service-driven economy, and the in-kind component of our present economy must expand to reduce the circulation of money in Auroville. "In ten years Auroville should develop a self-supportive economy that is karma yoga driven."

The governance group stressed the need to "restructure the existing working groups through a dynamic Residents Assembly that reflects a more vibrant and functional organization which is aiming for change with a sincere commitment to Auroville ideals". It recommended, among other things, the strengthening of the Residents Assembly Service, an increased involvement of youth in governance through an internship programme, encouraging the role of intuition in decision-making, and the exploration of alternatives to our present ways of meeting.

The group focussing on population growth identified the key as an increase in the 'actively-engaged core group' of our community. To do this, the entry process needs to be simplified and support and opportunities provided for those who really want to work for the Dream, particularly the young. This will require a major shift to "a culture of appreciation, collaboration, abundance mindset and proactive action".

The land, town planning and development group concluded that land consolidation in the city and protection of the Green Belt land use must be made a top priority, that sustainability must become an integral part of our planning, and that co-development with the bioregion on issues like health, education, and work and sports facilities is essential. Tackling the thorny question of whether the building of the city should precede or wait upon the developing consciousness of its inhabitants, it concluded that "The planning and development of Auroville as a city and as a society go hand-in-hand". The group also felt that work should begin on constructing key elements of the Galaxy Plan in the next 5-10 years.

These were only some of the many milestones that emerged from the Retreat process. During the Retreat itself, many of these insights were translated into measurable milestones with specific timelines for manifestation.

The common elements in all these findings



PHOTO: DON

Small groups working together. From left: Alan, Carel, Mandakini and Elvira

The 'elephants in the room'

Belief / view / stand	Counter belief / view / stand	Example of integration that may take us beyond polarities
We are here not to build a city but a society.	We are here to build a city, not a society.	We are here to build a city and a society, a society manifested in the form of a city.
Auroville must grow organically.	Auroville needs to be a planned city.	Auroville will be build with plans that allow for flexibility and organic growth within a planned framework
We must built Auroville as per the galaxy plan.	The galaxy is outdated and we need a new plan.	We build Auroville with the galaxy as an urban design concept while ensuring sustainable development that takes into account the natural resources and environment, contemporary insights in building technologies with low levels of embodied energy and urban plans that create a regenerative town.
All lands of Auroville are sacred and should not be exchanged or sold.	We need to urgently consolidate the lands of Auroville, starting with the city lands and since we lack funding, some land exchange cannot be avoided.	Use land exchange or sales as a means to consolidate city lands and obtain statutory land use protection for the greenbelt lands.
The population of Auroville needs to grow faster towards the planned population of 50 000.	There is no need of population growth. Quality is more important than quantity.	Quality and quantity are not mutually exclusive. Quality without a certain quantity does not fulfill the need of a replicable model. Quantity without quality is not sustainable.
In Auroville everything must be decided by the Residents Assembly.	We need a centralized strong administration.	The Residents Assembly organizes the work and activities of Auroville by setting up working groups which are empowered to implement their mandates, roles and responsibilities without Residents Assembly interference at implementation level.
Not a single tree must be cut in Auroville.	All trees that have been planted in areas that are earmarked for urban development need to be cut.	Many trees were planted to arrest top soil erosion with the knowledge that at some point in the future these trees will have to be transplanted or cut. Respect the built-up / open and green ratio of the city (48% / 52%) and of the green belt (5% / 95%).
In Auroville's education no certificates must be issued.	Certificates in education are needed for higher studies outside Auroville.	Do not study for certificates but ask for one if needed as a reference for studies outside Auroville.
In Auroville there should be full freedom in terms of work and commitments.	In Auroville there should be even more discipline than in the outside world and everyone needs to work full time for the collective.	Follow the guidelines of the Mother whereby each individual works for a minimum of 5 hours per day, seven days a week, for the collective.
The Auroville economy should be 100% in kind.	We are not ready yet for an in-kind economy and need to continue with a money-based economy for some more years.	We can have an economy that works with in-kind currencies such as kWh for energy, liters for water, acres under cultivation for food, etc.
There should be no grid power in Auroville and to start with not in the greenbelt.	We can have grid power everywhere in Auroville.	The question is not grid connectivity but energy sourcing. If we obtain our energy from sustainable sources, the grid functions as a demand-supply balancing system.
There should be a centralized water system for the whole of Auroville.	There should be decentralized water systems in Auroville.	There can be interconnected local systems whereby the interconnection network balances local demand-supply mismatches.
Auroville must be completed within a time frame (city and society). If we do not hurry up the outside world will crush Auroville or reduce it to a suburb of Pondicherry.	Auroville must develop at its own pace. Timelines and targets do not work here.	Work with plans that include quality, quantity and time parameters and revalidate these plans periodically.
We should first reach the level of consciousness that the Mother wanted in Auroville and only then can we build the town and attract more people.	We have to first build the town and the town will attract more people who will collectively develop the consciousness that seeks to manifest in Auroville.	The building of the town and the growth of consciousness will go together. The physical growth of the town will attract people and activities. People and activities will attract physical development. The town with its people is the "laboratory of evolution".
"Mother said..." so we should follow this.	'Mother clarified that the truth is evolutionary'.	Clarify when Mother is speaking of fundamental principles and when she is indicating an area where knowledge will develop according to the developing consciousness of the Aurovilians.
Everybody has a right to participate in decision-making.	Only those with proven competence should take decisions.	Allow opportunity for community input, but empower competent individuals to interpret it, provided they keep the community informed of their decisions.
Governance should be in the hands of the most enlightened.	Wisdom is distributed across the community so everybody should be involved.	Allow opportunity for community input, but empower competent individuals to interpret it, provided they keep the community informed of their decisions.
Empowerment of minorities / disadvantaged'.	Meritocracy (people are selected for positions on merit).	As far as possible ensure that all voices are heard and that training in governance is provided to all sectors but do not dilute the quality of people in our key groups.
Centralized decision-making.	Decentralized decision-making.	Centralized decisions made on basis of local input.
Rules / guidelines.	Each case is different.	Provide broad guidelines which allow for individual interpretation. Empower our groups to make exceptions when needed.
Auroville should keep experimenting with new structures and approaches.	We should rely upon old ways until we have the consciousness to use new ones.	Encourage widespread experimentation on alternative methods of governance in small groups. When something seems scalable, try it for a probationary period in a larger work group with a fallback option to resume 'normal service' if it doesn't work out.

included a strong desire to base all activities upon the fundamental values of Auroville, and to find effective ways of including and empowering the young and those from the bioregion in our discussions and our work. The underlying need that emerged was to foster a society of inclusiveness, sharing and trust based upon a common aspiration to live the ideals of Auroville.



PHOTO: DORIS

Aster Patel and Aromar Revi sharing an insight

Reflections

The stated objectives of the Retreat were, of course, ambitious. However, there was a clear attempt to reconnect with the Auroville vision, to reflect on present realities, and to come up with an action plan for the near future based upon the vision, clear timelines and a reiterative learning process. The success of that plan will ultimately rest upon those few individuals willing to drive change in the key areas identified in the Retreat, as well as upon the support given them by the larger community. (The youth group that formed during the Retreat is already active and has made a further presentation of its aspirations and plans to the community.)

From an organizational point of view, the whole Retreat process was a huge challenge. The initial organizers, the Auroville Campus Initiative group, were asked, on the basis of their experience of organizing the 'Joy of Learning' sessions, to coordinate the work of drawing up fact-sheets for each area. The assumption was that this information would suffice for participants to come up with goals and guidelines during the Retreat itself. It rapidly became evident that this would not work, and a whole series of preliminary meetings as well as extensive research were necessary during a short time period to generate the necessary foundation for the event. Organization on this scale also necessitated an expansion of the organizing team to include, among others, members of the Residents Assembly Service, a highly-efficient logistics supremo (Margarita) and a skilled group of 'techies' to run the back-office. Without such a formidable and committed team, the Retreat would not have been a success. And, perhaps, may never have happened.

Another person who played a key role in the planning of the Retreat was the chief facilitator, Aromar Revi. Aromar, with his vast experience of high level negotiation at national and international levels as well as his knowledge of Auroville, gave the initial structure for the two days of the Retreat and, when changes needed to be made, proved extremely creative and flexible.

One of the challenges that the organizers never managed to solve was the relationship between the concentrated work of the area core groups and the input from the larger community. The members of the Residents Assembly Service did a magnificent job in involving the larger community but too often, when the core group's work was opened up to a larger community process, the result was a dilution of energy, repetition of the work done or the ignoring of important insights and proposals. This was not helped by the pervasive misunderstanding of the distinction between insights, goals and milestones, which continued into the Retreat itself.

The facilitators also noted that, while there seemed a remarkable degree of harmony within the groups, this may sometimes have reflected the fact that nobody wanted to surface the 'elephants in the room', those subterranean blockages which, time and again, have subverted the community's attempts to move forward. The decision to expose some of them on the second day, along with an attempt to synthesise some of the main polarities, may have been one of the major psychological turning points of the Retreat, for it offered a possible way out of our dogmatic gridlocks.

There were other hopeful signs. The considerable efforts made to value the contribution of youth – the Retreat began and ended with performances by the youth, and their tables were deliberately placed at the very centre of the hall – resulted in what seemed to be a new sense of self-confidence in them and appreciation by others of what they have to offer as they sat and conversed on equal terms with older Aurovilians.

In fact, the real value of the Retreat may be an immeasurable one. For, by bringing together individuals who do not normally work together – young and old Aurovilians, Governing Board, IAC members and Aurovilians, and Aurovilians who have not been able to sit together for many years due to personal or 'political' reasons – the Retreat provided a space both for healing and for something new to emerge. This new dynamic and this 'softening' of ancient antagonisms will continue to make its effects felt for many years.

What, more than anything else, made this breakthrough possible was a tremendous collective thirst for change, for a movement forward based upon our ideals. The Retreat, for all its shortcomings – like its overlong, dense presentations and over-reliance upon the mind – relit that flame. It also provided structures, vehicles, for its expression in the years to come. And it provided the assurance, once again, that a community that is united in its desire to live the Dream can accomplish almost anything. As one of the organizers put it, "The main accomplishment of the Retreat was the rekindling of hope in the community".

Perhaps it was no coincidence that, during the Retreat, 'Power of Collective Aspiration' was happily blooming outside the Unity Pavilion...

Promoting safety – the work of the Security Team

Auroville was unaffected by the violence that erupted on January 14th in the neighboring village of Bommaiarpalayam following the brutal daylight murder of the husband of its panchayat president. Traffic on the East Coast Road was blocked for hours, but the violence spread no further. “They knew that Auroville had nothing to do with it,” says Ramesh matter of factly, “so they left us alone.”

Ramesh V. was Auroville's Police Liaison and has been running the Auroville Security Team for the last 11 years together with Anandamayi and Shahar, who each put in eight years. Recently, they all submitted their resignations. “It has been enough,” they say. “It's time for a change. A new team should take over. We want to move on.” The Working Committee is now looking for suitable replacements.

Are they satisfied with what was achieved? The years have been tiresome, they say, but yes, security has improved, even though the culture of violence in the surrounding area hasn't, or at least, not much. “It wasn't a glorious job,” says Shahar, “but we believe it was well-done.”

“We started to take our security seriously after that dark moment in January 2004 when Aurovilian Sydo was brutally killed in his house in Udumbu,” says Ramesh. “And over the years we did many experiments. Mother had said that security in Auroville should be ensured by a battalion of guards made up of athletes and gymnasts, so we formed day and night guards consisting of Aurovilians – but gradually people dropped out. We tried setting up Local Area Security Teams, groups of committed Aurovilians from each sector of Auroville, to help with security issues in their neighborhood – it failed. We tried to form a Rapid Intervention Team, a team of Aurovilians with exceptional skills like martial arts or with the physical strength to respond in crisis situations – this too didn't work. We then hired professional security companies, but for



From left: Shahar, Anandamayi, Ramesh

years we had to struggle with their constant demands for more money and their shortage of man power.”

“That wasn't a pleasant experience,” recalls Shahar. “They often threatened to stop providing services if we would not comply. At some point we'd had enough and terminated the contracts and went for direct employment instead. It was a good decision. We now hired people who had been working for security services before. We provide their uniforms, their raincoats, and their cell phones, and we cover their travel and food expenses and so on. Financially it works out too. The last security company we had worked with asked Rs 19,500 per person per month; we have been able to reduce that to approximately Rs 14,500. That's a substantial saving.”

“But the Budget Coordination Committee keeps complaining that Auroville's security is too costly,” says Anandamayi. “Security is their second heaviest budget, so they try to cut. But in fact, we are still running on the 2007

budget, yearly increased by 10% to keep up with inflation. We haven't expanded our team of 20 trained civilians and 3 Aurovilians. In fact, it is too small for all the work we are doing: looking after the day and night security, manning the check posts, patrolling the area, providing an escort service on demand, and running the fire department.”

Security has become a country-wide concern after the 2008 blasts that rocked Mumbai. The Tamil Nadu government made it mandatory that all public buildings have CCTV coverage, which is slowly being introduced in Auroville. And it started paying special attention to Auroville. In 2011, the Auroville Police Station was upgraded and is now headed by an Inspector. The police have also increased their mobile patrolling of the area, which has done a lot of good to reduce harassments and thefts. “They come within 10-20 minutes of our call,” says Ramesh. “The message is clear, we involve the police immediately.” He recalls how, many years ago, a young thief caught by a few Aurovilians was

escorted back to his home in the village and not handed over to the police. “For the Aurovilians, it was an act of compassion. But the youngster was so ashamed that he hanged himself. The family then threatened Auroville and asked for compensation. The matter went to court and was dismissed. Since then we bring all cases to the police.”

The relationship with the police is well-developed, with good contacts at all levels. “They have well understood what Auroville aspires to be and what our problems are and they give 100% support,” says Shahar. “For example, when the Bommaiarpalayam murder happened, they deployed a huge posse of police personnel to prevent any untoward incidents. We make regular visits to them in Villupuram or Chennai, to keep them informed about what's happening here.” When recently a drone was found in an Auroville community, the security team brought it immediately to the Police Station. “They were very supportive. Operating a camera drone requires special permission in India, which the Aurovilian who had bought it as a toy was completely unaware of. They checked if any sensitive photos had been made, found none and then let him go.”

The regular interaction with the police also shows the gaps in Auroville's security. “We don't own all the land in the city area, so we can't close all access points,” says Ramesh. “There are 36 entrances to Auroville, and for years we have been trying to close some of them but without success. It makes our work more difficult.”

We still have many incidents in Auroville, on average 12 each month. Regular incidents include thefts and break-ins, robberies, vandalism, sexual harassment, roadside robbery, bag-snatching, and sometimes physical violence caused by youngsters on motorbikes or even by people in cars. In the last year or so, the number of road incidents has reduced dramatically (on average 3 road side related incidents) due to the presence of the mobile Police patrolling unit, provided for the Auroville area specifically. The Team

also assists whenever an Aurovilian is involved in a traffic accident.

“We give regular updates on our security situation,” says Anandamayi. “We inform Aurovilians about recent occurrences and how they are being dealt with, and tell them how they can increase their security. We also talk to guesthouse managers and ask them to inform their guests about how they can prevent unwanted scenarios.” “Our job is to sense, assess and react to the challenges of the local environment,” says Shahar.

To improve security, the Security Team has proposed to erect more check posts; install more solar streetlights; install more CCTVs in key public areas to observe the movements of people; create a police outpost near Kuilapalayam village, and find ways to prevent heavy vehicle traffic driving through Auroville as a short cut from National Highway 66 to the East Coast Road. The Team have a regular interactions with the authorities on these topics.

A relatively unknown aspect of the work of the Security Service is its fire fighting work. Auroville has vast areas of forest and the threat of forest wildfires in summers is real. The closest fire stations are kilometres away at JIPMER, Vanur and Kalapet, and when fire incidents happen their fire engines take too long to reach the spot – or are too large for Auroville's roads. “It goes quicker using a tractor,” says Ramesh. “We have two 6 000 litres water tankers and a few fire extinguishers and Auroville's security guards have been trained to use them.” The team, he says, has been fighting small wildfires approximately six times a year since cyclone Thane.

There is one aspect where the Team is not mandated to intervene: conflicts between Aurovilians. “The Security Team is not an internal police which can be called in to solve internal Auroville disputes but they are generally present to assess the situation and stop violence whenever possible,” explains Shahar. “Internal conflicts have to be resolved differently. For we, too, are part of the Auroville family.”

In conversation with Carel

SOCIAL AWARENESS

The need for building a value-based society

It took me many, many years before I had the courage to tell my parents that I was in a live-in relationship with a man. My statement was received, at first, in silence. I believe my parents suspected the fact, but were in denial. Then my dad quietly asked, why didn't I just marry my boyfriend. The pain in his voice regarding my life-choices was undeniable.

I held forth about how I did not believe in marriages. I asserted that I saw marriage as a social sanction to my relationship, and that I had denounced the society that I had grown up in. And how I believed that if my partner and I could not keep the love and the beauty of our relationship alive, I did not see why society – the network of our extended family and friends – should try to save the relationship. My dad looked unconvinced. I pulled out a compilation of the Mother's words in Auroville and read to him a passage of how the Mother did not want couples to stay together if they no longer loved each other. My dad sighed. And then said, “I can accept your choice, but it is for the sake of the society that I would wish to see you married. It is hard for me to tell them (our extended friends and family) that you just live with a man.” Again, the pain in his voice was unmistakable.

It was my parents who introduced me to Auroville. I always thought (and declared as much) that I came from a progressive family – from the educated, upper middle-class, urban society.

Dad was an engineer, and had been to Europe and USA as a young trainee engineer. And mum found Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's vision of life to be a liberating experience. Growing up, I had all the freedom I wanted. Rarely, if ever, I felt discriminated against for being a woman. And yet, here we were at loggerheads, unable to resolve the dissonance between an individual choice and socially-established norms.

Marriage in India is a deadly serious issue. Indians can be warm, loving, generous, and accepting, but all of that can change in a flash if one wants to marry into the family. And then, the stifling weight of the cultural traditions come crashing down. Caste, social status, wealth of the prospective spouse, become immensely important issues. My parents and I, somehow without explicitly speaking about it, came to a mutual agreement. They accepted my decision. They accepted my partner, even treating him with the love and respect that is accorded to a son-in-law, but they never mentioned him to our relatives. I too tacitly respected their feelings and did not flaunt my live-in relationship. Our extended family just assumed that I had chosen to remain single.

Needless to say that the only reason I could carry off this deception was because Auroville was located far away from where I grew up in India. These invisible fault lines in our culture and society would have been far more treacherous to navigate if I had

grown up in one of the local villages around Auroville. For a local Aurovilian, one's parents and one's relatives are cognizant of the life-choices that one makes, and transcending those deep-rooted cultural issues of gender, caste, and status are not easy.

This point was painfully driven home to me on a recent issue when a young (as young as I was when I told my parents of my choice) Aurovilian woman, born in the Dalit colony of a local village decided to marry a friend whom she loved – an Aurovilian man from the same village but belonging to a different caste. A few days before the marriage, the prospective groom was “abducted” or forcibly sent to a rehabilitation center for an indefinite period of time on allegations that he was a drug addict. Other than ascertaining that the man was living at the rehabilitation center, investigations proved to be futile. The immediate family, all of whom are Aurovilians, made it clear that they did not want any further interference in what to them was a very personal, family issue. The matter was dropped, especially as there was a perceived threat that upper caste villagers from the surrounding area may rise in revolt against Auroville. Given the absence of the groom, the marriage was called off, and the girl stoically accepted her fate. Was caste discrimination an issue here? Most likely, but it could not be proven. Despite the lack of proof, under current Indian laws, there was enough circumstantial evidence to register a com-

plaint with the police, but in the end, a conscious choice was made not to pursue this option.

What the incident highlighted for me was the realization how naïve we are, as Aurovilians, in our eagerness to embrace this adventure of building a new society. We think, merely by embracing the ideal of human unity, by accepting the Mother's invitation of “goodwill,” that we can all harmoniously move together, as a collective, towards a society, based on equality and freedom. Alas, it is not so easy, our collective unconscious, our cultural baggage of unexamined assumptions follows us into our new life here. This is even more true for local Aurovilians, for they never can have sufficient distance from their old life – the friends and extended family that they grew up with live just across the road and to a greater or lesser extent are present in their day-to-day life.

In the over four decades of its existence, the community of Auroville has learnt many things – there is now an increasing division of labour, increasing organization and management and professionalism in every sector – yet, it has never paused to reflect on what sort of society we are building. As a community, we have never asked how can we bring to light our cultural shadows so that we can more fully embrace the ideal of human unity. Social psychology tells us that as individuals, we struggle in our personal and social lives with competing values: traditional and individual values such as the need for self-

achievement, power, status, social respect compete with the universal human values of liberty, equality and fraternity. And it needs deep introspection at an individual and collective level to build a value-based society.

Alvin Toffler, the futurist, reportedly remarked that the illiterates of the 21st century are not the ones who cannot read and write, they are ones who cannot unlearn and re-learn. And I fear that we, especially those of us who joined Auroville as adults, count among those illiterates. Educating ourselves to be a better human being in order to build a better society should be our first and foremost goal. This is not an easy task. Merely attending talks on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy or participating in the numerous popular positive psychology workshops being offered here is not likely to do the trick. Growth is a slippery slope, and it is largely up to the individual to embark upon and persist in this uncharted journey. It requires searing honesty, unflinching courage, and a relentless will to determine that the choices one makes and the actions one undertakes are in integrity with our professed ideals. And unlike the bricks and mortar with which we build the city, growth in the individual and the collective cannot be objectively measured and celebrated. And yet, this was precisely the task The Mother gave us, to create “a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness.”

(name of author withheld on request)

Non-violent Communication and Restorative Circles

A system of conflict resolution called Restorative Circles, based on the principles of Non-violent Communication, is proposed to become part of Auroville's Conflict Resolution Policy.

Meeet L'aura Joy, born 1978, second generation Aurovilian, and passionate about Non-violent Communication (or NVC for short). NVC, she explains, is about using communication as a means to get to the consciousness behind our words. "There's so much judging and blaming, even if ever-so subtle, in our language, and we're not aware of it. We're conditioned by our upbringing, culture and education to speak and think in ways that create separation between us. Once we start dissecting our language, we realize that what we're actually saying is not really what's going on inside us. NVC supports us to become more conscious of why we say certain things and to understand what's going on inside ourselves, without starting a blame game. At the same time, it's about developing curiosity and listening skills to understand what's really going on for the other person. NVC uses communication as a means, although the ultimate goal is not communication but the development of consciousness."

L'aura got hooked on NVC after reading a book about Non-violent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg, an American clinical psychologist. "I finished it in one night. A few weeks later the Auroville News & Notes carried a notice about a Nonviolent Communication workshop, and I signed up immediately. Within five minutes, I knew this was going to be my life. It struck home. It gave me such clarity about how we function as human beings, and how we can come back to our innate nature of goodness, from where we long and aspire to collaborate and live together harmoniously. I find NVC so empowering, because although it's based on a deep philosophy, the practice is very do-able and practical. It's a beautiful coming together of human psychology and spirituality."

This, she says, is also the background of Marshall Rosenberg (1934-2015), who had studied psychology and comparative religion. He was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, who all chose non-violence as a life path. Marshall's quest was to understand what separated us as humans and what brought us

back together. "I find that NVC deepens my understanding of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's teachings." It's a practice she now shares with others through workshops, coaching and consulting, being a Certified NVC Trainer herself (with the Centre for Nonviolent Communication, USA).

Restorative Circles

A natural offspring of NVC is the restorative justice system called Restorative Circles (RC), developed by NVC trainer Dominic Barter in the favelas (slums) of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. "It shares the philosophy of NVC that in our hearts we are good, that we want to be and do good, and if we don't, it's because we've somewhere along the way lost connection and trust. But, contrary to the normal justice systems that are punitive and don't necessarily support long-term reconciliation and healing, RC's intention is to restore trust and increase our willingness to co-exist, thereby bringing about a new kind of justice," says L'aura. "But it asks for a huge shift in how we relate to justice, and I imagine it will take time before we can fully trust in it."

RC invites people to keep talking until the conversation deepens. "Often conflicts are windows into old hurts, and in Auroville some of these hurts go back many years," says L'aura. "We have so many stories about each other: when we open one, we get automatically drawn into another one, and then again another one. In RC, we therefore do not confine our discussion to one issue, but let things develop. Often, the true conflict lies behind the present one, in older issues that people might have been avoiding, often because they are too painful or appear risky."

Another unique aspect of RC is the awareness that conflicts don't only affect the conflicting parties, but also others, directly or indirectly. "In RC, anyone can call a Circle, not just the two conflicting parties. We start with individual Pre-Circles, and one of the questions the Facilitator asks each person is 'Who needs to be there?'" Then we all meet – those who agree to come – and, guided by a Facilitator, people



L'aura Joy

share, ask questions, and practise deep listening. And if someone feels they have not been heard, there is the opportunity to speak again. The dialogue often deepens and people start to become aware of the impact of their actions upon one another."

The Circle meeting itself usually takes up to two hours, and if necessary there can be a follow-up. Ideally, the Circle closes with an Action Plan to rebuild trust and community. "Action Plan items may include someone offering to do 100 hours of community service, for example. Unlike in the punitive justice system, this offer comes from an altogether different place – from a place of having seen the impact of our actions and of genuinely wanting to repair the damage, instead of from the idea that this person must be punished and forced to pay his/her dues," says L'aura.

RC – while it is a good system for any group of people living or working together to process what happened and how it impacted them – is not ideal for immediate outcomes. "Those who want an immediate outcome should opt for a different system of conflict resolution," says L'aura. "For RC is long term; it invites systemic change. One conversation might not necessarily solve all the problems – but it opens the possibility for a shift, for a softening, an opening of the heart and, last but not least, a healing of the past."

RC in Auroville and India

Has RC already been used in Auroville? "A little bit, although RC here is still relatively low key. We've been learning and practicing RC for a couple of years now, and we have a small group of committed learners and facilitators, and we've facilitated a handful of live RCs." Since then, RC, along with Mediation and Arbitration, has been made part of the Auroville Conflict Resolution Policy, which will soon be submitted to the Auroville Residents' Assembly for approval. For L'aura, these are a positive signs change and transformation. "Although," she says, "there's a long road ahead."

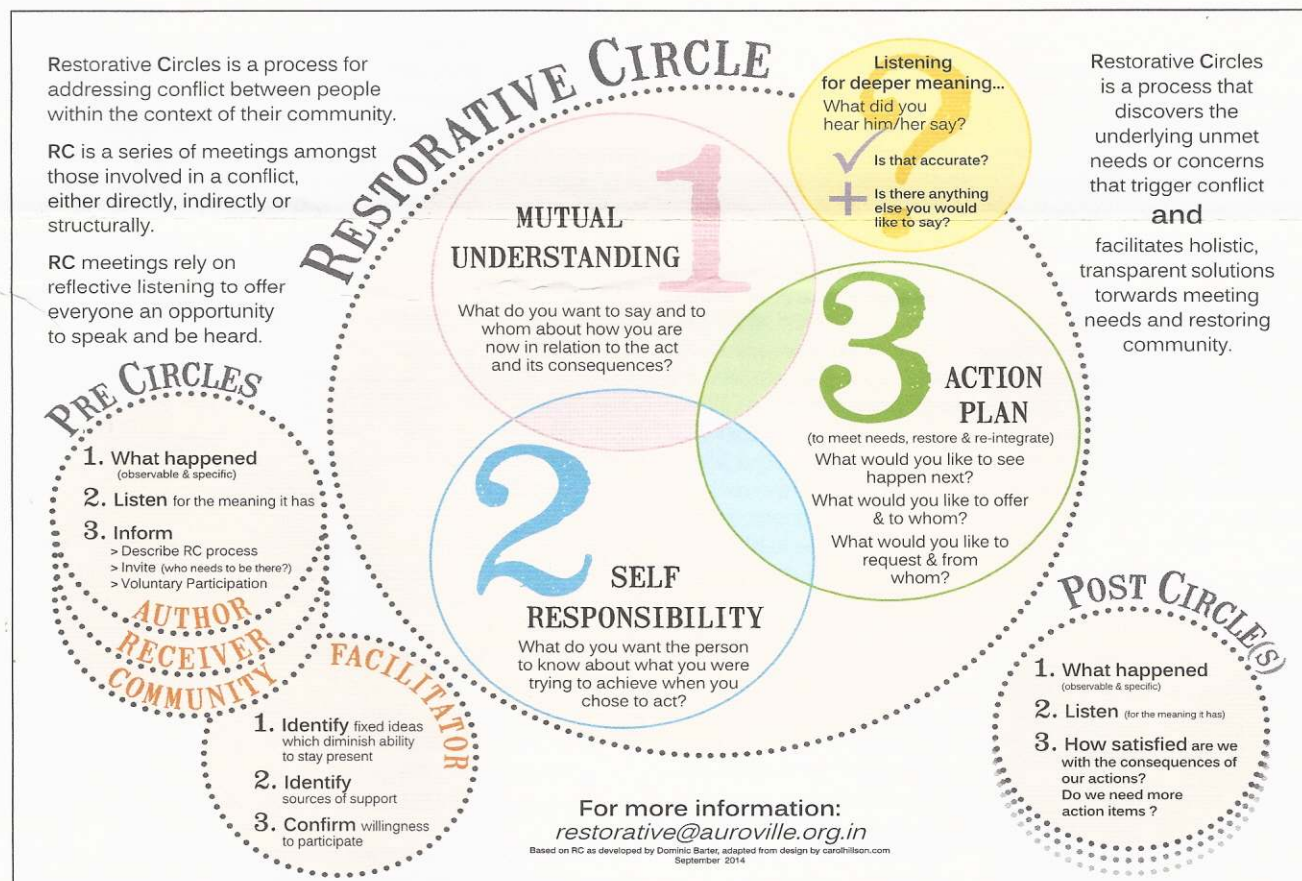
Like Auroville, India too is slowly getting exposed to alternative methods of conflict resolution. But while mediation has meanwhile been embraced by the High Courts of India, RC is still in first gear. L'aura has been giving courses all over India, most recently in Kochi where she and six other trainers trained over 200 enthusiastic participants from all over the world for 6 days. "It's still a drop in the ocean. But the Indian NVC community is quite strong and committed, and NVC and RC are growing."

In conversation with Carel

For more information contact restorative@auroville.org.in

For more information on NVC: cnvc.org

For more information on RC: restorativecircles.org



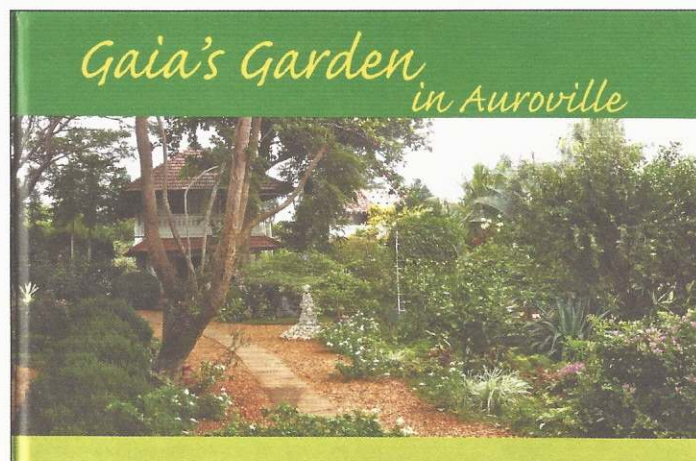
NEW BOOKS

Gaia's Garden in Auroville

Prisma has just released a new book that focuses upon one of the most beautiful gardens in an Auroville community. *Gaia's Garden in Auroville* contains many photographs, taken through the seasons, of the flowers, trees and interesting corners of this labour of love of Dutch Aurovilian, Kireet Jak, a project which he describes as "an interaction and play with nature waiting for the unexpected surprises of Mother Nature".

It also contains some memorable quotes about gardens and soil, including Emerson's "A weed is a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered", and Daniel Hillel's meditation on the link between soil and humanity. "The ancient Hebrew association of man with soil is echoed in the Latin name for man, *homo*, derived from *humus*, the stuff of life in the soil. This powerful metaphor suggests an early realization of a profound truth that humanity has since disregarded to its detriment."

This is a handsome little book. The only improvements I would like to suggest for the next edition is that the names of the beautiful trees and shrubs are indicated and that the eccentric



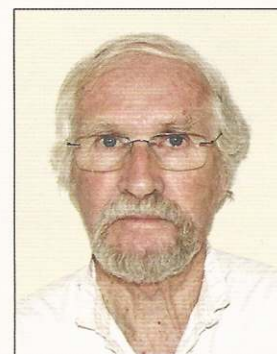
typography – bold fonts alternating with italics – is dropped for something a little less distracting to the reader.

Alan

Gaia's Garden in Auroville is available from Prisma, price Rs 380. For more details, contact prisma@auroville.org.in

PASSING

Tony Barter



On Wednesday March 4th, Auroville architect Tony Barter suffered a stroke and passed away at his home in Felicity. He was 73 years old.

Tony designed distinguished buildings in Israel, Japan and India before joining Auroville 12 years ago. A native of England, he travelled widely and was profoundly influenced by each of the cultures where he lived.

In Auroville, Tony initially started out with the then 'Aurofuture' team. His interest, and deep concern, has been largely with the town planning of the city. He was also actively involved in participatory meetings on planning, in the renovation of Pondy's Park Hotel, worked with an architect team on the master plan for Santé, the new Institute for Integral Health on the Crown Road, and co-designed Maitreyi II.

Tony's remains were cremated at Auroville's Farewell funeral grounds in Adventure on Sunday 8 March.

Village Heritage Festival and So Much More

On the weekend of Mother's birthday, February 21-22, the Puducherry Village Heritage Festival was held in the neighbouring village of Alankuppam. Just one week prior, the Director of the Tourism Department of the Puducherry Government approached the Mohanam Cultural Centre organizers who had proposed to organize the festival and gave them a green light. Government officials were confident it could prepare and execute a successful festival in such a short time period. The result proved the Government right. The two-day festival involved three villages within the Puducherry district: Alankuppam, Sanjeevi Nagar and Annai Nagar, and included art exhibitions, folk and classical performances, as well as traditional games, such as *Ilavattakal Thukuthal* (lifting a heavy stone) and *Pallanghuzi* (played on a board with pits). Over 14 different food stalls kept the crowds fed with traditional foods, and the 16 craft stalls sold one lakh worth of products in two days. The festival also brought together three panchayats in cooperation, a rare feat. According to the organizers, over 500 people attended the event, and its success was covered in a national newspaper.

The festival's success brought praise and attention to the work of Mohanam Cultural Centre, but organizers say that it was neither the beginning nor the end of their work. The festival was one of a series of projects they had undertaken in the past 15 years to build a bridge between Auroville's northern neighbouring villages and the township. The activities range from self-help groups for village women to water purification projects.

Building connections

Mohanam Cultural Centre, which celebrates its 15th birthday this June, was originally created by a team of young men who wanted to create a meeting point in the villages that would bridge what is happening in Auroville and the villages. The current team consists of four Aurovilians, Balu, Rajaveni, Yuval and Walter, as well as numerous teachers and volunteers. It has its centre in Sanjeevi Nagar village and offers numerous activities, including dance, summer camps, music and art classes for village youth, as well as a kindergarten and women's groups. For visitors, they offer cooking classes as well as village tours, in association with the Lively One Village Project, which supports and promotes artisans from Sanjeevi Nagar and Alankuppam villages. Many of these artisans have learned specific crafts by working for Auroville units, such as pottery, natural soap-making, or hammock-making, and then branched out on their own. The Mohanam team has drafted an "Auroville Bio-Region Handbook" which describes in detail over 50 villages in the bioregion, as well as a map and



Kolam drawing competition at Mohanam

brochure of Sanjeevi Nagar and Alankuppam villages. Mohanam organizers were also instrumental in facilitating the implementation of a water purification project in the village of Sanjeevi Nagar, in collaboration with a local women's self-help group and an NGO from Holland.

Research projects

The Auroville Bamboo Research Centre, started in 2009, is another project undertaken by Balu, which now houses a flourishing campus dedicated to research in bamboo in all of its forms: clothing, construction, food, jewellery-making and more. The Bamboo Centre frequently hosts student groups, both international and from within the country, such as a recent group of students from Bombay. The groups come and engage in intensive bamboo construction workshops in which they often build a structure on-site. Additionally, the Bamboo Centre trains and develops skills for the local population, so as to promote local livelihoods. Last year, the Bamboo Centre hosted 1300 people coming for workshops, had roughly 10 volunteers, and employed 35 locals. It is a little-known, but buzzing corner of Auroville.

It's also a corner that is expanding with the Mangalam project, in which WELL Paper, AVdzines, and Bamboo Research Centre are collaborating. This consortium of units is sharing space, as well as water and other resources, and slowly building up a campus for research.

At the heart of all of Balu's activities is the deep aspiration to build bridges between Auroville and the villages, specifically through art, music, and culture. "Cultural activities can be used as a bridge to bring people together as a community," Balu says. He also believes that the youth in both Auroville

and the village communities are a critical starting point in this dream, and he hopes to increase the interactions between both youth communities in future. "The youth of the village need to understand the dream of Auroville," says Balu, "and to understand that they live in a special place".

Balu is one to know, as his own life bridges these worlds. Now he, his wife and child are all integrated within Auroville but still straddle worlds, making him see the importance of building the bridge. Others on the Mohanam team value what he brings. "Only if you come from this region can you fully understand the intricacies of all of the issues involved," says Yuval.

Creating connections

The goal to build connections with the villages is increasingly being recognized outside of Auroville, most notably within the Government of Puducherry's recent move to develop rural tourism opportunities. The Mohanam team has been in dialogue with the Government of Puducherry since 2003 and there has been some occasional collaboration, such as the recent Village Heritage Festival. The biggest example of this collaboration is the Government's recent request to Mohanam organizers to create a village museum and artisans' gallery. In a joint collaboration between the Puducherry government, an NGO from Ile-et-Vilaine in the Brittany region of France, and the Mohanam team, there are plans underway for an interactive museum focused on the arts and culture of the villages. Differing from the Tamil Heritage Museum coming up in Bharat Nivas, the hope is to make the museum interactive, hopefully incorporating a restaurant and amphitheatre, perhaps more like the atmosphere of the Visitors Centre, to welcome guests and share the qualities of village life. Balu acknowledges the unique qualities held by the villages in this northern part of Auroville, specifically their level of workmanship and craftsmanship and he hopes these can be highlighted in the museum.

Building coalitions

While the Government is now ready to move plans forward, Mohanam's approach is to slow down and aim for quality. Building a coalition of people to move the project forward is a critical component of its success, according to the organizers. They talk about a past history in Auroville of tiny empires, describing how individual Aurovilians keep control of their individual projects and don't allow others to share in the management. It's time to get past that, they say, it's time to work together.

And they practice what they preach. The Mangalam project is a coalition, as is the recent example of partnering with AuroSoya to create a vegan restaurant on the Bamboo Research Centre

campus, or the recent collaboration with Kalai and the IG Museum of Bhopal to bring to Auroville the recent festival on NE India. The Bamboo Centre team saw a natural symbiosis with the Earth Institute, as one builds with earth and one builds with bamboo, and now they offer joint workshops in natural building materials in collaboration with Auroville Consulting. Similarly, the Mohanam team is hoping to work with Auroville architects and people who love museums to collaborate on this next big project.

All of this work doesn't come without its challenges. Building a coalition in Auroville, for instance, remains an uphill battle. They have sent invitations out to specific individuals to join, but the response has been minimal. They will now follow up in person. But the team also mentions the need for an increase in collective thinking about our relationship with the bioregion, and the need for more people to work toward further collaboration with the neighbouring villages.

But the biggest challenge, which is often a blockage, is the issue of land, both from the Auroville and also the village side. The

Mohanam team is working to secure a piece of land of up to two acres to build the museum and art gallery. They would like to see it built on Auroville land. That can be a sensitive issue with surrounding villages, as the community witnessed last June. One of the Aurovilians involved in the Mangalam project began to fence a portion of land with the intention to build. The land is owned by Auroville but has been laying fallow for years, and has been frequented by neighbouring villagers as a thoroughfare, sports ground, and toilet area. Upset that it was suddenly being fenced, a group of village women came to the site to protest. The Aurovillian became upset and he was subjected to physical violence.

Balu says this land issue is something that Auroville needs to look at deeply. "People often sell their land out of pain," he said. "Very few people want to sell their land. But they have to pay for a marriage, or they owe someone money, so they decide to sell. Auroville purchases it, but there is still a lingering pain in these villagers. What is Auroville doing to heal that?"

Land challenges are also present within the Auroville community. The Bamboo Centre team recently witnessed this when it requested to steward a plot of land so that it can grow bamboo. (At present, the Bamboo Centre spends up to 6 lakh rupees per year on purchasing bamboo outside of Auroville.) The land, which had again been laying fallow for 25 years, was under the stewardship of an Aurovillian who was hesitant to release stewardship. Eventually it was released and then fenced and planted by Balu's team. Twice the fence has been destroyed and the young bamboo saplings pulled up by villagers, causing over 4 lakh worth of damage. But each time the land has been replanted.

In spite of this, Balu and his team are hopeful. When he looks at all of the past and present challenges facing them, Balu says, "I think about the spirit of Auroville and know that there is something that I learn with each challenge. I believe that the Mother is behind it all." He continues, "Things have always come at the right time, and now, after 15 years, people are starting to recognize our work and things are picking up momentum." Balu and his team have big dreams. For the upcoming project, he dreams of four museums, or visitors centres, at the four entrances to Auroville. Each centre would highlight the distinct beauty of the villages nearby. But as the team has done for 15 years, small steps count on the bigger path. Already looking ahead to next year's Village Heritage Festival, they want it to be run entirely by the women of the three villages, and hope to incorporate more Auroville youth in the process. "We need to move away from 'us' and 'them,' into 'we'," says Balu, and every small step counts along the way.

Ing-Marie



Waiting their turn for the performance

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