

Auroville Today

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Towards a conscious collectivity

The fourth volume of Bhavishyate, the Journal of Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, contains two chapters that are of direct interest to Auroville: 'A model town – a Conscious Collectivity' and 'The Soul of a Collective Yoga.' Auroville Today talked to Deepti, the author, to gain more insight into these topics and their relevance to Auroville today.

AVToday: Deepti, to what extent do you consider Auroville to be a collectivity? And what kind of collectivity do we speak of? A collectivity of souls or a collectivity of egos?

Deepti: What is brought out in *Bhavishyate* is the fundamental demand of Sri Aurobindo's yoga – the necessity of a dynamic, inwardly conscious, aspiring collectivity. Humanity's socio-political progress over recent centuries has largely focused upon developing social Liberty and/or social Equality, as can be observed in the spirit of capitalism and socialism. There has been no socio-political attempt to embody Fraternity, the last great mantra of the French revolutionists. But, as Sri Aurobindo so cogently shows, brotherhood, fraternity, is a truth of the soul. It cannot be artificially generated because it is quite beyond the capacity of social and political devices: it has to be born as a living soul-state.

To recognize fraternity as the core truth of any sort of collective living is the first step on the journey of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. It is also the reason why, in a yoga aimed at transformation, a conscious collectivity of aspiring individuals is of fundamental importance. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother maintain that the individual may give the impulsion, indicate the path by embodying self-realisation, but there are certain group laws that demand a collective body for the fulfillment of earth's destiny, particularly if we recognise that earth's purpose is to be an embodiment of a Life Divine. This is the very aim and purpose of the yoga Sri Aurobindo has put forward. To illustrate this truth, I gave, as examples, the seemingly spontaneous manner, with no mental intention, with which the first collectivity, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, grew organically around Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Later, and in a wide universality of spirit, The Mother launched her great evolutionary experiment – Auroville.

In both places the one prayer of the body collec-



PHOTO: MARCO SAROLDI

Celebration of Auroville's birthday on February 28th, 2023.

tive is a harmonious 'working together' for this is the only way of enabling and embodying a collective sadhana. As it is an active, dynamic, materially effective action that is sought, sitting quietly in meditation seems not the most purposeful means of progress. This is a yoga whose core demand is dynamism, is visible material change. In all circumstances, it is a quietude of consciousness that must be maintained as a vibrant inner condition of the being. For it is this atmosphere that radiates outward into the collectivity.

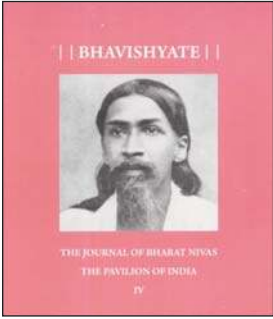
Sri Aurobindo has written about the fundamental necessity of a larger change brought about by a conscious and united collectivity, something he called a deva sangha. But he warned that "a collective yoga is not like a solitary one, it is not free from collective influences; it has a collective soul which cannot afford to be in some parts either raw or rotten." In other words, all those who are part of the

collectivity must be absolutely conscious of the Truth of their being, which is the only source of true action. The issue for a group is that there is always a mixture of obscurities, a mixture of unconsciousness, and each one absorbs the prevailing atmosphere which then creates the quality of the collective consciousness. To escape this there is but one means: to become conscious of oneself, more and more conscious and more and more attentive. This is why The Mother called the process of self-finding, of bringing to the forefront one's inmost self, the first necessity of becoming a True Aurovilian. This is the only means to achieve evolutionary acceleration.

My answer to your question then is that the only true collectivity is the one connected to the soul, not the ego. We didn't choose each other, it's our soul that brought us here and it is a soul demand that we work together in spite of our very resistant minds and vitals. Yet, what we continue to encounter in our collective life is the gross vulgarity of the outer natures of people, and darker ego characteristics of those who seem unable to practice self-limitation. Indeed, I had assumed that the collective atmosphere of Auroville had overpassed certain stages of human behavior; but recent times have demonstrated how extraordinarily ordinary the atmosphere of Auroville can be. Personally, my solution is always to turn to the words of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to find within myself a ground of trust and faith. These journals are a result of that quest!

I would argue that these 2 chapters of the journal are not the only ones relevant to Auroville. Most of what's in this issue is meant to put before those who have chosen to be here a few of Sri Aurobindo's trenchant remarks. For instance, the one about religion, or about doing what is called 'good works' in the world. He insists that he seeks "a way to be opened that is still blocked, not a reli-

gion to be founded". Religions create rigid and fixed approaches, but here he requires us to transcend all types of exclusivities, to bring all the extremes together to be worked through. This is precisely the purpose of his yoga. Humanity has failed so far because the mind tends to be exclusive but Mother insists that she wants all the extremes brought together so the 'real force' can be discovered. Such remarks are so profoundly relevant in this moment when we appear to be 'celebrating' the 150th year of his birth. We need to be rigorously true to him, and not reduce him to a comfortable, moral, easy to understand human teaching!



Sri Aurobindo, in the Life Divine, warns about the development of a communal ego, based on the ideas of the mind and the drive of the vital, not on the soul. Is that what you see developing in Auroville?

We should not forget what Mother said of the fascination that power, money and control over others exercises on the egoistic human consciousness.

She says such traits will be the last to change as they are the most recalcitrant characteristics of human consciousness. Distortions can be generated by any exclusive argument. For instance, at the moment the overriding weight being given to one of Auroville's collective purposes: 'we are here to build the town'. Of course that's the intention of the collective experiment – but it is the means – it gives us the critical mass for the true purpose, which is a concentrated collective change of consciousness. I often wonder: 'what sort of town' as if it were the town and not the dynamic intensity of collective aspiration which could generate the new consciousness. Mankind has built towns for millennia, but the human vital physical consciousness remains just as it is!

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PHOTO: ASHWINI

Deepti teaching a class at Last School.

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You cannot fix this profound problem using artificial social and political devices. And you certainly can't impose it. This is the reason why all spiritual philosophies, religions and yogas have not succeeded in fundamentally changing human consciousness.

What 'state of consciousness' do you think is required to manifest the town?

This is not something we humans can achieve. Therefore Sri Aurobindo's yoga is primarily one of surrender; of offering oneself in one's entirety to the Universal Mahashakti who will work in us. But in the interim The Mother spoke about spiritual hierarchies and suggested for Auroville "a hierarchic organisation grouped around the most enlightened centre and submitting to a collective discipline". What does this mean – have we even begun to understand this? In other contexts, she explains what a true spiritual hierarchy means. If we look at our past history, people's behaviour has been egregiously defective in this sphere. And this has created karmic cycles we are still working through. Mother clearly stated in a handwritten note of February 17, 1968 that "Here nobody can be the exclusive leader – everybody has to learn to collaborate" and she adds "it's very good discipline for the vanity, self-love and the excessive sense of importance of personalities". This is a profound guidance for the assertive darkness of human egoism.

Spiritual hierarchy is a hierarchy determined by the purity of one's link to the Divine and the inner purpose of one's present life upon earth. It's not something that can be asserted and claimed arbitrarily. One's status or position in this outward world, which is a world of falsehood, has nothing to do with this. Mother said that all conscious individuals are part of a hierarchy, but there is no arbitrary will which places them. She said that "it's not a decision, we don't want any categories: there are these, there are those, and then this one will come in here and that one will come in there – all those are mental constructions, they're worth nothing! But the true thing is that NATURALLY, according to his receptivity, his capacity, and his inner mission, each one takes his place in the hierarchy, the place he truly, spontaneously occupies, without any decision."

There are people in Auroville who occupy positions for which they seem to have no inner sanction. But there are also many who are perhaps in their

*Chet-han.
La personne ne peut être
un chef exclusif - tout le monde
juste apprendre à collaborer
C'est une très bonne discipline
pour la santé, l'union propre
et le sentiment spécifique etc
l'importance des personnalités.
Blessures J*

**The response from The Mother to
Manoj Das Gupta to his question
about organization:
Here nobody can be the exclusive leader -
everybody has to learn to collaborate.
It is a very good discipline for the vanity,
self-love and the excessive sense of
importance of personalities.
Blessings
Mother**

place – some of whom are now threatened with arbitrary removal. Mother, in Her Dream, said that 'positions' should be replaced by 'opportunities to serve' and there are many in Auroville who do just that – they serve without calculation, in the place they have to be, and they form the true scaffolding that holds our inner collectivity together. For me, Auroville is a collective soul, the collectivity exists, even though it is missing a lot of elements. Yet there is no question that its external forms of governance are the most vexed of all things.

Could you explain what you mean by this?

When we study Sri Aurobindo, we discover that there are truths that prevail upon one plane of consciousness which may become completely false upon a higher plane. This is supremely illustrated in the debate between Love, embodied by Savitri, and Death [Book 10 of Sri Aurobindo's Savitri]. She calls death a "dark browed sophist" and accuses him of putting forth "a truth that slays". On the contrary, Savitri says her "god is love and sweetly suffers all". That is the Supreme Truth that Auroville wants to serve. We live in a world governed by death's

truths, but Auroville is created precisely to serve the forces that will bring forth a world governed by Divine Love. This demands from us very rigorous laws of collective functioning. Auroville is a creation of Divine Grace: therefore we must treat all disagreements as things to be worked through patiently while holding the awareness that our minds may take positions completely contrary to our soul's choice. If we recognise that opposing arguments are relative, are the "truths that slay" then it is precisely the process of putting things in harmony that must be painstakingly achieved.

I hold that Aurovilians, largely accept the idea of a town, as was powerfully demonstrated in the Dreamweaving exercise. I was delighted by the approach that was adopted. For me it met the standard of the Auroville spirit: no one attacked or put down another's proposal. Rather, each one open heartedly adopted the wider idea; the more comprehensive spirit wherever and from whomever it emerged. This is precisely the method of the Upanishadic mantras – it's always the wider intuition that is embraced. I was glad to attend a collective effort after more than two decades of avoiding large meetings. It is a great loss to the body collective and a sign of the difficulty that this effort has not yet been adopted.

Auroville will fail if it is built merely in the manner of another ordinary Indian city or if it is not universal, if the international aspect of Auroville becomes a travesty. One of the things that makes Auroville so stimulating is that people from more than 50 countries are living here. It is a truly such a rich international mix. In Last School we have sometimes more than 10 languages being studied. Where would you find such a variety in such a small collectivity! Reducing this is to push the spirit of Auroville into the unmanifest. Yet, I have the faith that this can be only a temporary setback. For one of the things that is clear is what Mother said, that "Auroville will be because it is decreed." No human agency can stand in the way of that.

How do you personally deal with the present difficulties?

I try to abstain from interacting with people who have rigid positions. It's a very dull exercise to interact with those who think they are absolutely right. You meet a wall; you are confronted with arrogance. And if, moreover, both parties are not on equal footing, nothing can come out of such a discussion. Harmonisation needs conscious collaboration, needs a will to find a higher position, which is

the only place where a meeting ground exists for all opposing positions.

The spirit of Auroville demands that such an effort will need to happen at some point in time. Auroville exists only in its effort and aspiration for unity. And we are all called upon to be heroic. In a seminal conversation in 1972 with Roger Anger, Navajata and Udar Pinto [the *Auroville Architect and the heads of Sri Aurobindo Society and Sri Aurobindo's Action respectively*, eds.] The Mother described heroism as the power to be completely united, and she added that "the divine help will always be with those who have, in all sincerity, resolved to be heroic." She called upon them to make an effort, conquer pettiness and limitations, and above all tell the ego: "your time is over". "We want a race without ego, with the divine consciousness in place of the ego. That's what we want: the divine consciousness, which will enable the race to develop and the superman to be born." That's also what she expects from the Aurovilians. And then we may experience what Sri Aurobindo says in *Savitri*: "to love and feel oneness is to live".

People may not be heroic yet, but I think I see many individuals who are intensifying their lives, probably in response to the difficulties they experience at present.

That's also my experience. I have personally experienced an exponential growth in people seeking to explore the spiritual ideals of Auroville. This year I have offered, on their request, a long series of exploratory session to the teachers of an Auroville primary school as well as an Outreach school. Presently, I find myself exploring such topics in different locations literally every day of the week as well, of course, at Last School which has been holding such sessions for almost three decades. Is it the Time Spirit which is awakening more and more the need to know 'why are we here'? For me, it's clear, the only solution to problems is to live consciously in this collective experiment the dynamic yoga of Sri Aurobindo that will create this dream of a conscious collectivity. I believe many Aurovilians are stepping deeply into themselves. That, and the movement towards having more mutually supportive activities, will help build our inner collectivity.

In conversation with Carel

*A copy of the magazine Bhavishyate # IV can be obtained by emailing
deepti@auroville.org.in*

UNDERSTANDING SRI AUROBINDO

Notes on sanatana dharma

Recently, our Chairman is reported to have asked whether Auroville was not meant to take *sanatana dharma* to a higher level and create gnostic beings. As I, and perhaps many other Aurovilians, are unfamiliar with the phrase *sanatana dharma*, and had never before heard it linked to Auroville, I was prompted to try to discover more about it and how it was understood by Sri Aurobindo.

I consulted a scholar who is familiar both with Sanskrit texts and with the works of Sri Aurobindo, as well as other sources, and this is what I have gleaned so far.

Many Hindus today believe that *sanatana dharma* – meaning 'eternal religion' or 'invariable law' – was the original Sanskrit name of the Hindu religion, and that it was used for what is now called Hinduism in ancient times. However, I have been told this is not the case. The term does not occur at all in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, and while it occurs in old texts like the *Mahabharata*, it always means something like 'everlasting law' or 'ancient rule'. The phrase never equates the eternal religion with Hinduism.

This is confirmed by a famous modern Hindu teacher, Chandrashekharendra Saraswati Swami, who wrote in 1995: "Hinduism was not the name of our religion in the distant past. Nor was it known as 'Vaidika Mata' (Vedic religion) or as 'sanatana dharma' (the ancient or timeless religion). Our basic texts do not refer to our faith by any name."

In fact, it seems that before the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the term was not applied to the Hindu religion. Then it was used to define orthodox Hinduism by those Hindu groups who felt threatened by attempts to purge Hinduism of certain practices. And it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the term began to be applied to the modern or neo-Vedantic form of Hinduism, which presented itself as a "universal religion".

Sri Aurobindo was influential in this because in his famous *Utapara* speech of 1909 he used the term extensively. He reported that he had heard the voice of God during his imprisonment, telling him:

Something has been shown to you in this year of seclusion, something about which you had your doubts and it is the truth of the Hindu religion. It is this religion that I am raising up before the world, it is this that I have perfected and developed through the rishis, saints and avatars, and now it is going forth to do my work among the nations. I am raising up this nation to send forth my word. This is the Sanatana Dharma, this is the eternal religion which you did not really know before, but which I have now revealed to you.

However, Sri Aurobindo's definition of *sanatana dharma* was much wider than simply being a label for orthodox Hinduism.

For, he continued,

It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it, because in this peninsula it grew up in the seclusion of the sea and the Himalayas, because in this sacred and ancient land it was given as a charge to the Aryan race to preserve through the ages. But it is not circumscribed by the confines of a single country, it does not belong peculiarly and forever to a bounded part of the world. That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion, because it is the universal religion which embraces all others. If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal. A narrow religion, a sectarian religion, an exclusive religion can live only for a limited time and a limited purpose.

And he emphasized this universality in his revised version of the speech, published one month later in the *Karmayogin*:

This sanatana dharma has many scriptures, Veda, Vedanta, Gita, Upanishad, Darshana, Purana, Tantra, nor could it reject the Bible or the Koran; but its real, most authoritative scripture is in the heart in which the eternal has its dwelling.

In other words, what he seemed to be saying was that the universality of the *sanatana dharma* stemmed from the universality of spiritual experiences. And these could be accessed by people from many different religions, or even those with no religion at all.

What is striking, however, is that after Sri Aurobindo's overtly political period of the early 1900s, he hardly ever used the phrase *sanatana dharma*. It doesn't appear in any of his major works, or in his later writings, including the *Letters on Yoga*. Perhaps this is because he found the expression inadequate to encompass the transformative work he had embarked upon, or perhaps because he no longer consciously identified himself as a 'Hindu'. For his attitude to Hinduism in general also seemed to change in the Pondicherry years.

He continued to admire and be inspired by what he termed the three fundamental 'credos' of Hinduism. "The awareness of the One, the Infinite that takes many forms. Next an acceptance of a multitude of ways of approach to this One. Finally, and most important...an understanding that while the Supreme or the Divine can be approached through a universal consciousness and by piercing through all inner and outer Nature, That or He can be met by each individual soul in itself, in its own spiritual part, because there is something in it that is intimately one or at least intimately related with the one divine Existence". These three things were, he concluded, "the whole of Hindu religion, its essential sense and, if any credo is needed, its credo".

Yet he increasingly distanced himself from any formal adhesion to the religion. Underlining this, in a letter to his brother

written in April 1920, he wrote, "I am not a saint, not a holy man — not even a religious man. I have no religion, no code of conduct, no morality." What he wanted to establish was "not a fixed and rigid form like that of the old Aryan society, not a stagnant backwater, but a free form that can spread itself out like the sea in its multitudinous waves."

He did not deter his followers from using sincere religious practices in their private lives, but he was adamant that the Ashram was not a 'religious association'. "There is no creed or set of dogmas, no governing religious body at the Ashram", he explained, "there are only the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and certain psychological practices of concentration and meditation, etc., for the enlarging of the consciousness, receptivity to the Truth, mastery over the desires, the discovery of the divine self and consciousness concealed within each human being, a higher evolution of the nature".

To an English disciple who wondered whether his 'un-Hindu' nature somehow disqualified him for the yoga, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "It is not the Hindu outlook or the Western that fundamentally matters in yoga, but the psychic turn and the spiritual urge, and these are the same everywhere".

When another disciple observed that the Ashram favoured Hinduism because most of the members were from Hindu backgrounds, Sri Aurobindo's answer was unequivocal: "If this Asram (sic) were here only to serve Hinduism I would not be in it and the Mother who was never a Hindu would not be in it."

"It is far from my purpose," he wrote in 1935, "to propagate any religion new or old for humanity in the future. A way to be opened that is still blocked, not a religion to be founded, is my conception of the matter."

Surely, this is why The Mother was so emphatic that there was no place for religions in Auroville.

Perhaps, then, what the Chairman meant when he referred to the need for Aurovilians to take the *sanatana dharma* to the next level is not that we should create a new religion, or be bound by the forms of the old, but that we should elevate all what is true – 'eternal' – in religion to a new level in our individual and collective efforts to 'unblock the way' to a higher consciousness as a step towards the creation of gnostic beings.

In any event, whatever the Chairman's intention and meaning, I'm grateful to him for encouraging me, through his remark, to embark on a process of discovery which has deepened my understanding of Sri Aurobindo.

Alan

Vaastu Shastra, yantra and Auroville

On January 4th, 2022, during a Dreamweaving session, there was a presentation on the concept of *Vaastu Shilpa Shastra*. Auroville architect Mona Doctor-Pingel introduced the concept by explaining that *Vaastu Shilpa Shastra* is commonly translated as the ‘Science of Building’, and is a component of the traditional, collective and evolutionary knowledge systems of India. It is multidisciplinary in nature and had been alive for thousands of years as a thriving science before it was largely supplanted by Western approaches about 150 years ago.

Sri Aurobindo, she explained, devoted a large section of the *Foundation of Indian Culture* to architecture. Also, in *The Human Cycle*, he explained that reason, ethics and aesthetics have to be balanced; if we don’t balance these three elements, it will not lead to a harmonious result. Applying this to the science of building, he speaks of temple architecture and proportions, and how sacred architecture was always at the service of something higher, eternal and symbolic.

Vaastu Shastra takes into consideration diverse aspects and branches of knowledge, such as astrology, mathematics, numerology, climate, function, time and place. It mainly deals with climate and human comfort and brings together macrocosm and microcosm, by combining a rigorously scientific approach with the architect’s own intuitive faculties, so accessing the inner and higher dimensions.

Contrary to certain beliefs, in *Vaastu Shastra* nothing is totally fixed. However, as in any other Indian art form, only when one goes deep into something can one go a step beyond. Architect Sashikala Ananth, who is an expert practitioner of *Vaastu Shastra*, always emphasises the importance of developing one’s intuition rather than blindly or rigidly following rituals and mathematics.

Today’s architects are usually taught to use the Golden Mean as a system of proportion, widely popularised by French architect Le Corbusier in the middle of the last century. However, Mona discovered that by applying the principles of *Vaastu Shastra* one can work out a proportion that is at the same time client-specific, climate-specific, function-specific and site-specific. *Ayadi* calculations, which are used to calculate dimensions in *Vaastu* design, use astrology only as a starting point, and then go deeply into mathematics and work on a holistic approach. Unfortunately, today, since Indian architects are not taught this science, astrologers have taken over this branch and treat it as a predictive/prescriptive method rather than taking a more scientific approach.

The best known examples of ancient Indian temples and cities based on the principles of *Vaastu Shastra* are Srirangam and Jaipur. These are quite successful. One can see in their designs that they have flexibility and are not cast in stone. In the Master Plan of Jaipur, for example, one whole square (block) from the sacred nine squares, which are based on the nine planets, is realigned to accommodate the hilly topography. In other words, Mona emphasised, *Vaastu* is a precise science, but not dogmatic; it’s deep, rich, and subtle.

Teaching Vaastu Shastra

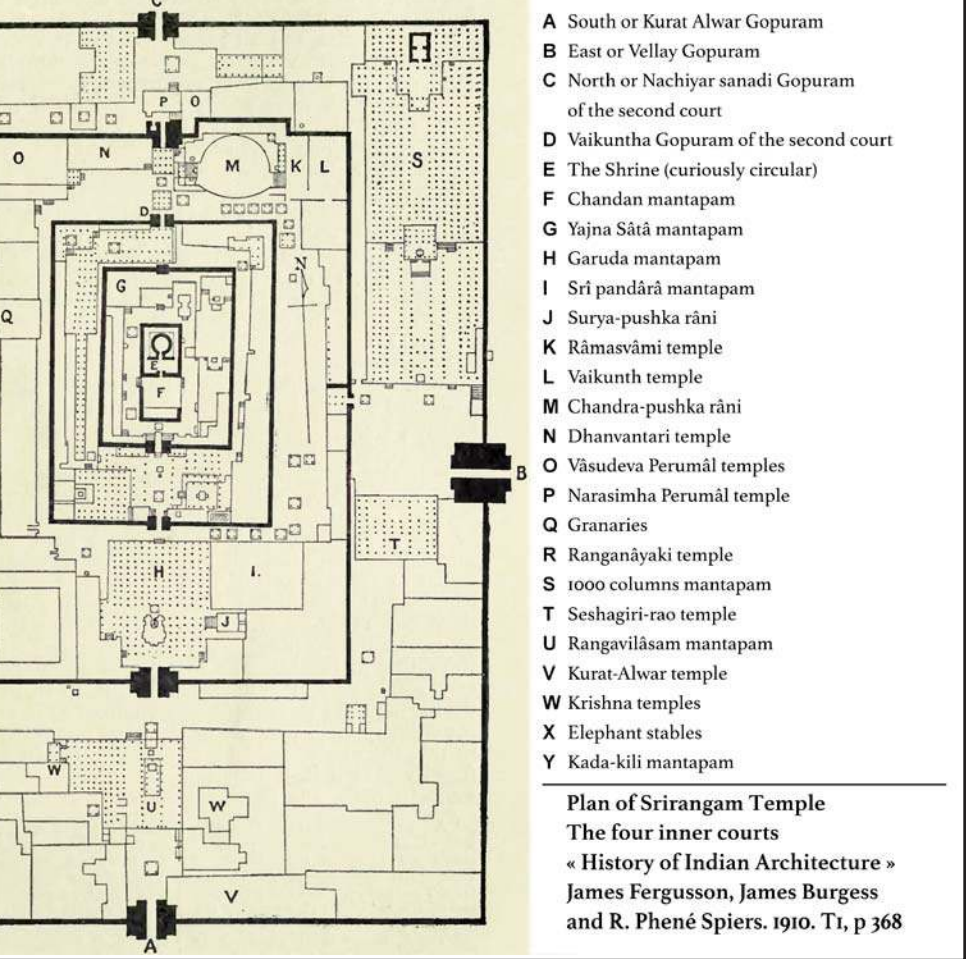
Today, there are not many *vaastu* teachers available. Sashikala Ananth is an exception. She studied architecture in Chennai, and went on to study *Vaastu Shilpa Shastra* for ten years with Ganapathi Sthapathi at Mahabalipuram. She combines in her learning the knowledge of yoga, mythology, psychology, behavioural work, fine arts, *Vaastu Shastra*, crafts, and architecture. Over the decades she has designed many programmes aiming at bridging the traditional and the modern, and has written several books on *Vaastu Shastra*.

Since 2013, Sashikala has conducted several workshops on *Vaastu Shastra* in Auroville, with a particular focus on studying the Auroville Master Plan in relation to *Vaastu Shastra*.

In the Dreamweaving workshop, Sashikala clarified that *Vaastu Shilpa Shastra* is about bringing Time and Space into relationship, in such a way that something is created in the outside world that is capable of evoking good energies, transformative energies, wellness, joy and so on.

“So when we create in the world outside – objects, buildings, thought, whatever it may be – if what is created can embody practicality and usefulness, aesthetics and lasting delight, then we have created something that is timeless. This is the basis of *Vaastu Shastra*.”

“Sri Aurobindo and Mother haven’t by accident chosen to create the community of Auroville in India. This soil here has a certain power and a certain wisdom. I believe it is our



task and responsibility to bring this wisdom and consciousness into everything that we create.”

Yantra and the Master Plan

A *yantra* is a design generally made up of geometric lines that serves to invoke or materialise certain forces. Sashikala explained that *yantra* have not only certain shapes and forms (they can be two-dimensional or three-dimensional), but certain arithmetical co-relations between form and space. A *yantra* is also related to the cardinal directions, which play a very essential role in *Vaastu Shastra*, and it has to be crafted and placed at the right time.

At some point, the eminent Indian architect B.V. Doshi had said that the Galaxy plan was a *yantra*. This is why, Mona explained, when the question of *yantra* came up in the context of Auroville’s Master Plan, Sashikala had been asked for her input.

Specifically, Sashikala was asked by a dreamweaving participant, “When there is a favourable geometry based on *Vaastu*, and at

the same time this form is difficult to achieve, or contradictory to the natural and ecosystem situation, what would you do? Because the big issue now in Auroville planning is the ecology versus the geometry.”

She replied that it is a very difficult question to answer because it will be context-based. However, “In my personal opinion, I would defer to Nature, and I would not hold fast to geometry. Because I believe that when you have a small property or a small site, then you can adhere to strict geometry. But the moment you are moving away from it into large tracts of land, like the plan of Srirangam... if you look at the way in which each of the subsequent spaces have been dimensioned, there is a shift. It does not exactly follow the same rectilinear form, but there is some shift in the design, which has something to do with the land form. You can have different individual forms, but the relationship to the cardinal directions is of prime importance. Then only it is a *yantra*.”

Biophobia – and the need to value nature

Some years ago, when I lived in Hong Kong, I hosted my friend Alan Watson Featherstone when he gave a series of talks on “Restore the Earth”. He mentioned at some point the concept of ‘biophobia’, the hatred or dislike of nature. Initially, I felt uncomfortable with the strength of the word ‘phobia’.

However, soon after his visit an area adjoining the former border to China, which had been left untouched to become a wilderness, had its fate discussed. Immediately corporations jumped in with many schemes, all of which involved concrete, making money and destroying what had become wild, in favour of hotels and factories. It was as if there weren’t enough already and the very existence of wildernesses was an affront.

This got me thinking about biophobia and the ease with which nature can be destroyed and profited from by humanity. I suspect that underneath the urge to build over nature is probably a fear of the unplanned, of the uncontrollable. Nature does not dance to our human tune, it can appear alien, like the ‘*here be dragons*’ medieval map makers denoted at the edge of our known worlds.

U.S. ecologist David W. Orr emphasizes that biophobia is culturally acquired, a product of modern living that distances people from the natural world to such a degree that they become indifferent to other organisms and antagonistic toward the environment. Nature can be perceived as ‘other’ and thereby can be treated as something that could be cut down, ‘planned’, and built over.

However, the richness of what nature offers us as humans, the intelligence and power inherent in our environment, is a voice needed at the planning table. The realisation of



evolutionary perfection in nature manifests itself in seemingly random chaos, and this is something that takes time to appreciate. Wildness is not just external but also an inner attitude to how we are co-habit with the wild and uncontrolled. One of the joys of the reforested parts of Auroville is the returned flora and fauna, the call of the birds, the flowering and fruiting trees and the thrill when we glimpse larger mammals such as porcupines, monitor lizards or jackals. Awe can steal over us in a dawn or dusk walk through our forests.

Regarding our current travails in Auroville, the push for the city and the manner of its implementation can appear to devalue nature in favour of plans that build over ground realities, defiantly so at times. The crown road is to be a perfect

circle, something which does not appear in nature. The first completed landmark of all the road reconstruction is, of all things in Auroville, the building of a car park.

For a while the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) numbered trees by stripping away the bark away. I’ve also noticed a lot of understory pruning in forests, which makes me wonder if it’s a dislike of the unkempt. It’s notable that the first place to be deforested was the Youth Centre, youth usually being the wild experimental portion of our lifespan.

The greenbelt and its work in reforesting a desert plateau has been one of the main achievements of Auroville. It’s inspired many thousands, possibly millions, to re-wild the planet, one of whom is my aforementioned friend Alan, the founder of ‘Trees for Life’. He was inspired by a stay here in the early 1980s to reforest millions of trees in Scotland.

This message has even reached the UN, which has declared this (2021-2030) the decade of Ecosystem Restoration. Humanity is waking up to the vital importance of biodiversity, nature reserves and fauna and flora corridors. ‘Vital’ in both senses of the word, important and full of life. And yet here we are in Auroville, the ‘city the earth needs’, seemingly on the way to returning to the previous paradigm of asserting dominance over nature. For me, a city of the dawn would be one that aspired to combine urban and wilderness in as much harmony as possible.

It’s hard to accurately gauge the effect of biophobia as is so individual. I imagine that some of those pushing hard for the city would affirm their love of nature, but this is a plea to our planners who are in power at present to take into account the richness and life in our restored eco-system, for all our sakes.

Peter

The Forest path

Forest was born and raised in the countryside outside of Toronto, Canada. He has recently chosen Auroville as his future home and is planning to start his Newcomer process shortly.

I grew up in the countryside, which is why I love living in the Greenbelt. Only later did I eventually move to Toronto, where I lived until I was 28. I grew up without religion or spirituality, because neither my parents nor family believed in that. But I always remember questioning things. As a child I used to talk to whatever was there, listening for the response. I used to ask for things. When my mother was ill, I remember asking the universe to help her and keep her safe. She was my primary caregiver, all I had, and I did not want to lose that. I remember having conversations with the unknown, thinking about death, wondering what happened when I was lying in a dark room with my eyes closed and everything was silent. I wondered, is this death, this nothingness around?

My mind has always been like that, asking questions and wondering about the unknown.

Up until the age of 28 I lived an unhealthy lifestyle of parties, always pursuing the next excitement. I then felt that there must be more to life. I shifted suddenly and profoundly because I felt that if I didn't stop that lifestyle at that point, it might never happen. That is when I changed my lifestyle, I got into hatha yoga and travel.

My travels eventually led me to Nicaragua, to a community in which I participated in an eco-village design course. Some friends and I had the idea of creating a community somewhere, and thought that by doing this course and living in a community, we would get to see what is required. The course focused on the ecological, economical, and social aspects of a community, as well as worldviews. In that course, we learned about Auroville, because it is one of the oldest existing intentional communities in the world.

I decided to come to India to study yoga in 2015, and that is when I first visited Auroville. I've been living in India since 2015, never in one place for longer than three months, focusing on learning and teaching hatha yoga, travelling, exploring, experiencing culture and art.

What eventually led me back to Auroville sparked in me in Canada during the lockdown. During my morning meditations I kept having this feeling that I wanted to come back to Auroville. And it then inspired me to contact Auroville. So I reached out, and found a way to come here.

I'm very community oriented, and felt there's something to do here. Everybody here, is here for a reason, right? It was like removing myself out of the normal matrix. I thought I would come to Auroville and have something to focus on every day through work. And I would be back in India, the motherland, which I love so much.

I've been here ever since, volunteering with the Village Action Group, running their social media accounts, documenting the work they do through photos and videos, doing some designing, and whatever else they might need help with. It's also great to work with the Tamil community; it opens a whole other perspective and world. For example, I get to go to the villages and see the festivals and celebrations and the songs and dance, and it's incredibly special.

Did you come to Auroville with the intention to stay?

I first came with the intention of becoming

an Aurovilian. I thought I could open a unit, but I did not know about the processes and rules and that I could only start the whole procedure of becoming an Aurovilian after six months of living here. I have never heard 'no', as many times as I have here, followed by so many restrictions. And then there seems to be a system of hierarchy, of 'oh, you're only a volunteer'. But I'm actually here supporting myself, contributing to the economy, and working for free. I did sign up for that, but sometimes a little more encouragement would be pleasant. I mean, after all, we're all volunteers here, and that is how Auroville was built! It's like a caste system within Auroville, with Aurovilians at the top, many other 'statuses' in the middle, and then the volunteers.

Also, when I arrived this time the conflict in the community was very intense at that time, I thought I might not want to stay, especially because initially I was leaning more to the environmentalist side. I saw the violence, the destruction of the trees and of the Youth Centre. But after some time living here, one understands that things haven't been able to move forward, and that change is inevitable. So the current situation can be seen as a chance for collective growth.

Later I heard stories from different sides and perspectives, so my stance has evolved over time.

Can you say more about this?

I grew up in the forest, so I have a strong connection to nature. Nature is the Earth and creation, it's divine in itself. God is in everything, not just in human beings, as can be seen here, for example, through The Mother's connection to flowers. So when the events happened at the Youth Centre, I could not help but see the devastation. And my sympathies were also influenced by what I read on social media and simply being closer in age to the younger generation who has taken on a more environmentalist stance. For this is the youth of Auroville, and their centre was taken down, so I could see it through their point of view.

And then I spoke to other friends, and heard there are other sides to the story. How there was a stagnation period during which there wasn't really much happening, and people got a bit too comfortable. And I heard other stories, that people that have houses on the proposed Crown Road always knew that their house was going to be torn down, and they still chose to build it there, being okay with the fact that one day that would happen.

So it shouldn't be a surprise now. But it's also not good to be very rigid, fluidity is part of life. So perhaps the crown need not be a perfect circle, but it can still be a ring road. And if it can save a watershed that took years of environmental protection, why can the road not be diverted a little bit?

I believe in the path of least resistance. Any decision is unlikely to please everybody. We must take into account that we can't appease everyone, and everybody has their own point of view and their own truth and their own way of seeing things. But we need to find a way to move forward which affects the least amount of people negatively. Otherwise, no progress will ever be made. Or perhaps things will move for-



Forest

ward, but more people will be affected in a negative way or be angry and resentful, which in the end won't benefit the community as a whole.

We are here for human unity. So how do we unite, knowing that we are never going to be on the same page with everyone. There needs to be some compromise, the ability to look at things through other people's perspective, even though we might not agree with it. This brings me back to the fluidity and flexibility I've learnt about through hatha yoga. Flexibility of the body and of the mind, because hatha yoga is really there to prepare your mind to be able to do the inner work.

So many different walks of life converge here, we need to be able to work together. This is the essence of Auroville. There are various interpretations, and although The Mother often revised what she had stated earlier, she did specify that it should be a city. And although it cannot become a city of 50,000 overnight, I believe expansion to be the key, because if there's going to be a shift in human consciousness, there needs to be more than 3000 minds and consciousnesses for Auroville's effect to spread out into the world.

Have you finally decided to live here, then?

It wasn't until the end of last year that it became clear that I really wanted to live here. The turning point for me was attending the Yucca programme. It was an eye opening experience. During six days we had the opportunity to go in depth into different aspects of Auroville. We got to meet many pioneers and hear about their experiences with The Mother. Seeing that internal goodwill, that spark that's still alive after all these years, made me feel that this is indeed the place for me.

So the future seems bright to you?

Some people might perceive the current climate as very scary. But I think it depends on which lens you choose to look at it through. I

choose not to focus on the grim side. I choose to see the opportunity here. I'm not part of the club yet, I'm neither a Newcomer nor an Aurovilian. But I have hope. I'm practical and I can get things done. I was told that we need more practical people here because we have a lot of dreamers, and we need more people like the original pioneers perhaps, who actually worked with the land, planted trees and built structures. While I have been hearing a general 'no', many times in response to many initiatives, if you connect with the right people, anything can be done.

I met many bright lights. They actually called us the Bright Lights in the Yucca programme, or the future lights of Auroville. The Yucca programmes are full these days, and some were surprised to see that so many people might want to join Auroville during these times. It's a community, there's power in numbers. We need to find people that have that zest to create something.

I think there's a lot of opportunity, a lot of energy here. It's about channelling it into the right direction. There are some internal changes that could be implemented, such as changing outdated experimental processes that don't really work effectively anymore (why are we still using blue sheets when everything can be more effective and traceable digitally?). I feel that things need to be more transparent. I've heard lots of stories about units where lakhs of rupees just go missing. There needs to be accountability, and new experiments need to be tried. For example, could the maintenance system one day meet more than people's basic needs, and help create abundance in different areas of life, individually, and as a community?

My perception is that a lot of people live very individualistic lives within Auroville. We need to come back to the essence of what is community. Even within our smaller communities, there should be places to meet regularly, where everybody living there has to attend just to check in with each other and clear the air. Perhaps if the social aspect of a community is stronger, making decisions collectively and resolving conflicts would be more approachable?

Although we all have our baggage, it is the people who have been here for a longer time, living in a village with a small number of people, who may find it more challenging to really forgive or get over past traumas and egos. We all have egos, undeniably, so how do we humble ourselves? How do we bring ourselves back to our first intention of coming to Auroville?

This was one of the big questions that struck me during the Yucca programme, asking myself every day, what is my purpose here? I think everybody should ask themselves that every day.

I believe it also helps to have some kind of daily practice that grounds us in our spirituality, whether it's yoga, meditation, breath, anything that works. Something to keep reminding ourselves, since it seems to be so easy to veer off the path and lose sight of things.

It's a powerful time. Things are moving. So let's take control of the situation. We all can come together and make it happen in a way that can be most beneficial for most people and for the environment, and for the creation of the city beyond 3500 people.

In conversation with Chandra

10 Years of Auroville Tango festivals

This year, tango was celebrated in Auroville over five days, with 130 dancers from India and abroad.

Tango started growing roots in Auroville around 2008 and simultaneously in different cities across India. It was in the following years that tango really settled and started to anchor itself in India. What is interesting is how the spirit of Auroville infused itself into tango in India.

During the first Auroville Tango Festival in 2012, we had about 90 participants come together from India and abroad, and there was an atmosphere of concentration, of study, of dedication and of self-giving. That set the tone for a lot of what would develop into tango in India.

One of the questions that was asked this year to the tango community across the country was whether there is a distinctive flavour or approach to tango in India. Many of us who have danced both in India and abroad, have noticed this difference. The responses were affirmative, there is indeed an aspect of care and of concentration, of diversity, a sense of oneness, expressing

itself in Tango here.

We are talking about Argentine Tango, yet it's a dance, and art, and a search that keeps evolving as it reaches new shores, taking on its own flavour and absorbing a part of the spirit of places.

And in India we have seen time and again how anything that crosses into her borders is taken into the Indian culture, and is transformed.

Culturally speaking, these days, the East generally has less casual physical contact than the West, so one of the aspects here is that there isn't an immediate ease to physical closeness. Therefore the tango embrace is something that has almost taken a sacred turn because we don't casually take strangers into our arms.

And so when we take that step, there is an awareness, there is a sense of respect and a sense of care, that we are in that space because the music and tango is asking us to be. That takes a certain effort because we have to bring the best of ourselves to the

dance floor.

And Tango is particular, in that it remains in a sort of niche. Comparatively, other dances such as salsa seem to have gained more popularity, they are more accessible, providing more immediate joy and fun. Tango requires a certain amount of dedication and work to just get into it. The fact that it's completely improvised at each moment demands that we figure out how to communicate with each other, without words, just through the body and flow.

Sometimes the first few weeks or months after starting tango, people experience an intense joy and gratitude. After that, there starts to be a lot of work. It takes endurance to just get started and to get anywhere, because there's no such thing as a sequence that one can learn. Everything is improvised in the moment with the music, so one has to be constantly deeply listening and flowing with one's partner.

Aurevan in conversation with Chandra

On the Banyan tree at the centre of Auroville

In our previous issue we devoted two pages to the Banyan tree, including a brief historical overview. Since then, a former Matrimandir executive has sent us something that he wrote in 2004, which provides additional details about the tree. As many people have a special relationship with this tree, we publish this to further fill out the historical record.

Observers of Nature and lovers of trees who have lived here long enough will have noted the several characteristics that are unique to banyan trees, such as:

- a banyan tree has the ability to fuse its limbs, and to wrap itself around another tree or any support it finds secure.

- a banyan tree will sprout aerial roots with more or less proficiency according to its needs for growth and the conditions surrounding it.

- over a long period of time a banyan tree 'moves': its original trunk usually dies out while the stronger roots it has sent down become new centres of gravity for further growth of limbs.

- a banyan tree will expand over and around any 'obstacle' so as to retain and acquire both exposure to light and access to moisture.

We do not know clearly the age of this Banyan tree; how old was it when the Mother indicated it was to be the geographical centre of Her city-to-be, of Her dream? Twenty years, fifty years old?

Its trunk was sizeable but as it was prey to constant plunder—by goats or for fire-wood—its development had been heavily stunted.

An amma's [*a local lady who was the original 'guardian' of the tree. eds.*] determined dedication to it allowed for some measure of respect, but it is only when we all began to organise our life around it and responded to the care the Mother extended towards it, and the inner significance She accorded it, that its natural life-power could begin to fully manifest.

A number of roots — I think it was perhaps twelve? — were encouraged to develop; the largest roots one can see today are among those.

Fairly soon, in the mid-1970s, while cleaning the dead wood, several cavities were found in the original limbs and trunk. I do not remember all the techniques or remedies that were tried at the time, but eventually one method was selected:



Meditation under the Banyan on New Year's Eve, 2022

those cavities were cleaned and filled with lime.

Over the years new limbs grew from the stronger roots, so that the tree began to develop not one but two or three structures, each having slight variations in their growth pattern: one could observe, for instance, that new leaves would appear in one distinct canopy, then another.

A few more roots were encouraged to provide supports for new limbs extending so far out that they were in danger of breaking.

I think grass was first planted in the early 80s, when a ring of stone benches was placed around the tree and someone brought a prototype of a set of sprinklers, for which the kids were the happiest! This was, I think, Korean grass at the time. Later we found that St Augustine grass was preferable as it was much sturdier and required much less water, a definite plus both in terms of water-conservation and for the health of the tree.

What guided us in planting grass was the sense of that heavenly peace and delight expressed in the painting Huta had done under the Mother's direction, named by her 'The Spirit of Auroville', with squirrels, birds and rabbits frolicking and wild flowers singing from a verdant floor.

The Banyan tree kept growing and extending and, as the construction of the twelve large and twelve small petals around the sphere proceeded, there was a concern that somehow one ought to exercise some control, perhaps try to guide the growth away from Matrimandir, or at least prevent it from reaching closer and interfering with the constructed parts.

The extent of the shade obviously increased as well and that might jeopardise the possibility for such flowering shrubs as hibiscuses being planted in the inner gardens adjacent to the tree.

This was how it was decided to shift the Garden of Unity westwards and to construct the Unity pond as its new centre.

At the end of the 1990s we observed several facts: we found a large increase of rot in the main trunk and in some of the original limbs; and the canopies, loaded with unpruned branches, were reaching the ground almost all around, and some branches were now lying on the outer slope of the nearest of the small petals.

Making a thorough inspection we found that the lime fillings had prevented us from seeing the rot continuing underneath, and that there were many crevices and cracks retaining moisture, havens for all kinds of insects, besides termites.

We also found that several of the original limbs, thus weakened, threatened to break apart or fall off.

These phenomena had occurred in other banyan trees that were familiar to many of us: one at 'Promesse', which was struck by lightning and collapsed, the other one at the reception area, which was eaten away by termites and severely damaged in a storm.

We proceeded to:

- remove all the lime fillings
- thoroughly clean every cavity and, in the process we had to hollow out much of the main trunk which had become a spongy mass of red soil mixed with decomposed organic matter, and home to a wide variety of bugs
- cleanse the hollow parts

from all fungi and mushrooms

- remove the grass from the foot of the main trunk and build a black clay slope instead

- clip back all the branches by a few metres, leaving a good clearance all around

- check each and every limb in terms of weight and direction and stimulate the growth of additional roots so they would be safe from the effects of a storm (we had several violent wind storms)

- discourage further growth in the direction of Matrimandir by pruning the joints so that ulterior growth could be directed away from it.

We wanted to 'save' the main trunk, that is, preserve life in it, and keep the sap flowing. That is why a couple of roots were encouraged very near to it so that eventually they would fuse, while regular check-ups and applications of neem oil on the inner part of the original trunk would keep it clean and prevent any further intrusion by termites or fungi.

In this way the overall canopy has since then gained in height, but been reduced in span, and it is quite feasible to monitor further growth without violating the integrity of this tree, sacred to all of us and beloved by all.

(Name withheld on request)

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The safety and boundary awareness programme

Last October, YouthLink conducted a sexual harassment awareness campaign and recently followed up on that initiative by bringing together all the services within Auroville working on matters related to sexual harassment to create Safety & Boundaries Awareness (SBA). The intention is 'to increase awareness, build an emotional support network, optimise prevention, and provide education within the community.' Currently, SBA comprises YouthLink, Chrysalis, Maatram, CRP3 (Conflict Resolution Policy), Auroville Child Protection, AVSST, RA Working Committee, Jump Inward, Auroville Council, and Internal Complaint Committee.

SBA launched a two week awareness campaign on sexual harassment on April 10th, that started outside the Solar Kitchen entrance, with workshop pamphlets, information packs and energetic youth ready to answer queries and bring this topic literally into the light of the blazing day. As stated in the flyer, 'Sexual harassment is a difficult topic around the world and in Auroville as well. We feel it's important for us to bring awareness in our community and educate each other to create a safer environment.'

Lucrezia, one of the YouthLink organisers of SBA, was motivated by the chance to bring different community initiatives together as she had noticed relevant groups were not in contact with each other. She and others from YouthLink often get to hear of incidents as people reach out to

them how to go about these situations. Lucrezia suggests that those who experience sexual harassment in and around Auroville "rarely find the right support" and many don't feel able to talk about these incidents.

There exists a spectrum in the topic of harassment. Around Auroville, there seem to be several forms that are most prevalent. Peer-to-peer, occurring when peers behave in ways that ignore consent and boundaries, which Lucrezia adds "is why we need education." Night-time roadside, most often involving individuals who are not a part of the community. Stalkers, a form of mental harassment that takes place over a prolonged period of time. Domestic violence, which happens in home settings by individuals familiar to the victim.

The SBA awareness campaign featured a mix of events, workshops and resource information, with some events having a minimum age (13 or 18) or involving parental consent to participate.

Events

'Bravely Speak Out' was a street theatre performance in Tamil on the topic of child protection, created by Yatra Arts Media in collaboration with Auroville Child Protection Awareness and supported by AVI Germany. The performance aimed to bring awareness on topics that are



AWARENESS MONTH

Safety & boundaries awareness (SBA)

often not talked about: alcoholism, domestic violence and child sexual abuse. The play highlighted the importance of raising our children with love, care and protection and the fact that children can also play a role in staying alert and keeping safe in their community. The play was performed in several local villages.

The Chrysalis Game Show was 'an exciting and fun team trivia game to test your knowledge of safety, dating, sexual health and more' with prizes too. Chrysalis is an Auroville educational project focusing on health and well-being, puberty, self-esteem,

menstrual care, consent and sexual education for youth and adults.

Workshops

The SBA collective offered an array of self-defence, healing and other learning sessions. Krav Maga, an Israeli martial art taught by Malaika, is described as 'an effective, modern, and dynamic self-defence and fighting system... designed to be practical and intuitive for people of any age, shape, or size' where 'you will learn to defend yourself and your loved ones'. Giacomo and Youthlink offered a 'Self-defence' class which 'is a countermeasure that involves defending the health and well-being of oneself from harm. The purpose of this workshop is to 'minimise the risk of being a victim of assault or harassment, and how to behave in such cases'.

An interactive workshop on consent, 'My Body, My Voice, My Body, My Boundaries, My Body, My Consent', was offered to help participants learn how to say and receive a 'No', and how to respect our and others' choices. Paula offered a session 'My Body, my Health' on anatomy and the physiology of sex and STDs where participants are informed with facts on sexual health and staying healthy. There was also an 'Art Day', facilitated by Lavanya, an artistic and musical journey to create a safe 'space of harmony'.

Resources

Perhaps one of the more lasting results of this awareness push was the information pack that YouthLink have put together so it's clearer who to contact for support should the need arise. The pack's info-graphics offer accessible visual information covering many aspects including: consent, differentiating between sexual misconduct, harassment and abuse; different forms of harassment; verbal, physical, written and non-verbal; and what your options are if something has happened to you in Auroville. YouthLink has sent the packs to local schools and is making them available to youth at several other locations.

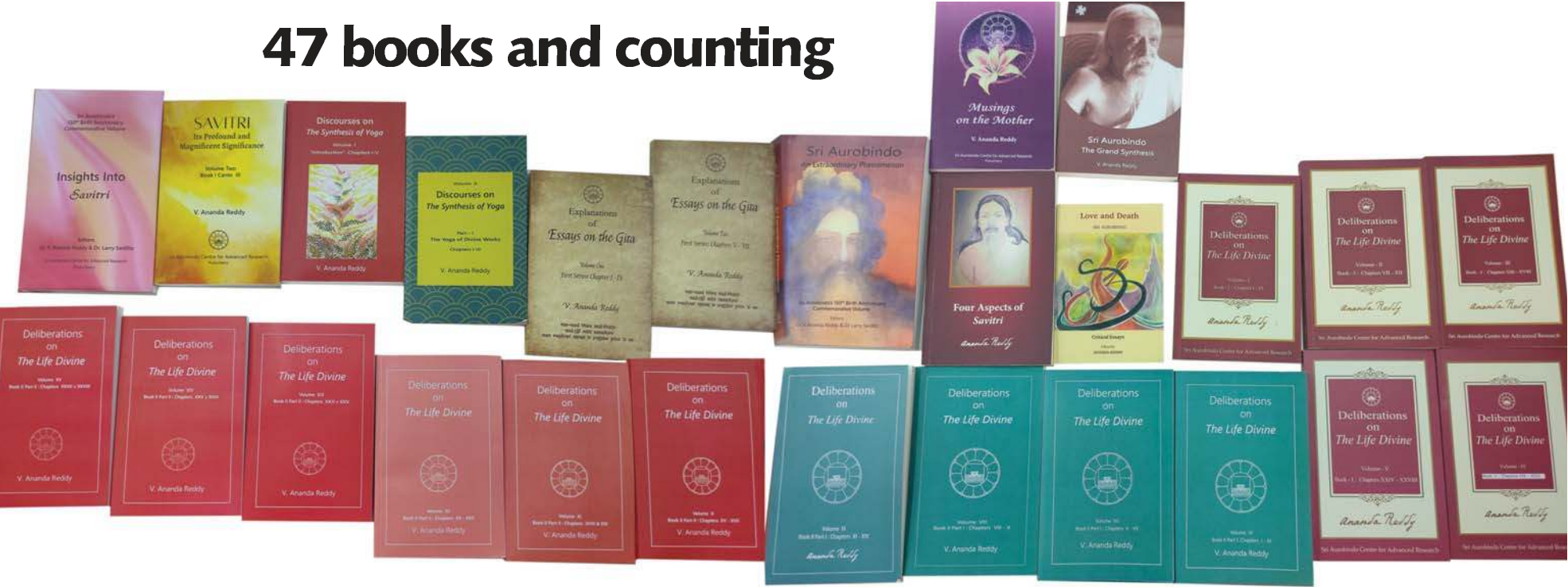
To bring all the groups involved in SBA together is a noteworthy accomplishment for YouthLink, more so to highlight issues that are often suppressed and taboo. Beyond the events, the empowerment message of what is and isn't acceptable will be a legacy for the future.

There is a bitterness to this initiative and its necessity. Bitter that sexual harassment and worse is so widespread in our world and that there is such dire need for education, sweet that so many different community groups and individuals are collaborating to address the need. Bitter that it's the youth themselves who had to initiate the effort behind SBA, and sweet for the same reason.

Peter

For more information visit www.youthlink.org.in

47 books and counting



On the occasion of Sri Aurobindo’s 150th anniversary, the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research (SACAR) in Pondicherry received a grant of Rs 12 lakhs (approx US \$ 15,000) from the Government of India to publish Dr. Ananda Reddy’s commentaries on five major works of Sri Aurobindo. Auroville Today spoke to Ananda, Director of SACAR.

“The grant took us less than halfway through,” says Ananda ruefully. “We have at least 47 books to publish, each between 220-320 pages, but we could only do 25. The commentaries on *The Life Divine* comprise 15 volumes; *The Synthesis of Yoga* will need 12 volumes; the *Essays on the Gita* 14 to 15 volumes; *The Mother* (chapter six only) one volume and then there is *Savitri*: I can’t even fathom how many volumes that will need. At Savitri Bhavan alone, I gave 250 hours of talks on *Savitri*. Add to that the many lectures I gave at the Hall of Harmony of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and elsewhere in India and abroad, then the hourly count will easily reach a thousand. We will need at least another 12 lakhs to finish all these works.”

How did this all start?

I lived in Bangkok from 1992-1995, teaching English and Philosophy. But as I was bred in the atmosphere of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, I felt uneasy without their books around me. Then someone sent me Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita*. I was delighted and shared the news with four or five Indian nationals who were my friends. They asked if I couldn’t talk to them about the *Essays*. That’s how my ‘career’ started!

When I returned in 1996 to Pondicherry, the manager of the International Guesthouse, asked me to teach the *Essays* there. Soon afterwards, the Ashram school came with the request to speak about Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*. That, I felt, it would be beyond me. But then I realised that many years earlier, in 1964 when I was still a student at the Ashram school, I had received a message from the Mother in reply to a question I had asked. “*You can count on my blessings for truly understanding Savitri in its profound and magnificent significance,*” She had written. It dawned on me that with such a support, I could start giving classes on *Savitri*. From one came the other, and for about 12 years I offered three to four classes a week, on *Savitri*, *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and on the *Essays on the Gita*. These were extremely detailed talks: line by line, para after para. And after 12 years, I had completed all these four books. In between, I was teaching at Savitri Bhavan, I gave lectures abroad, gave talks on *The Mother* and gave Darshan talks at SACAR. But those were summary talks, not as in-depth as I had done at the Ashram school.

Those talks were all recorded on audio cassettes. I used to give free copies to interested people, but it never occurred to me that my talks would ever be published. But my wife Deepshika had a different point of view. She wanted them all to be transcribed, and she organized a veritable team of transcribers from all over the country. This resulted in a cupboard full of handwritten notebooks, some of them barely readable. All of them would need to be retyped if the material ever would be published.

What to do next? I had no idea. Then Shruti joined SACAR. She had earned her Ph.D. on Sri Aurobindo’s Poetics and Aesthetics, had been teaching at the Auro University in Surat, and is deeply moored to Sri Aurobindo’s and The Mother’s teachings. She took upon herself the

massive task of preparing these transcriptions for print. With our own means we were able to publish five books on *The Life Divine*, but we had no funds to even contemplate publishing the rest.

The flip came with this Government of India’s project of celebrating Sri Aurobindo’s 150th anniversary. We had submitted a 40 lakhs budget request. We were granted 12. We estimated that this would allow us to publish 10 to 12 books.

At the time, I had developed some health problems and decided to have a checkup in Hyderabad, where my family lives. I took the opportunity to get a quotation from one of the printers there. They offered the work at 1/3rd of the price quoted by the Pondicherry printer, who had done the earlier books. I realised we would be able to print 25 books with the same budget. Then we, that is Deepshika, Shruti, Larry Seidlitz, a couple of others, and myself, set to work. We typed the transcripts, edited the spoken language, eliminating repetitions and replacing bad examples with better ones, and made sure that there was a consistent flow in the logic of each section. I would give the last touch, sometimes deleting or rewriting sections that were no longer relevant or that I had come to see differently. We prioritized *The Life Divine*, which has now been completed. These books are based on my summary talks, not on the line-by-line talks I did at the Ashram. That’s a different set of recordings; if we would ever publish that, it would be another 25 volumes.

You have been studying Sri Aurobindo for a lifetime. Weren’t you, at some point in time, tired of trying to explain Sri Aurobindo? After all, there is this persistent belief that Sri Aurobindo cannot be mentally explained.

I agree that a drop of experience has more value than a ton of books. But that doesn’t mean that explanatory books have no value. India has a tradition of *Bhashyas*, the commentaries or expositions on religious or spiritual primary or secondary texts such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* or the *Sutras* of Hindu schools of philosophy. The Indian sage Shankaracharya was one of the first to do so, and this was followed by hundreds of others.

My works falls in the category of commentaries on Sri Aurobindo’s writings. I have focused on five major books. For me, the interesting factor is that four of these five books were signed by the Mother – I would go to Her on my birthday and bring a book which She then gracefully signed. Only *Essays on the Gita* was not signed. (*laughing*) But once she came in a dream and signed this book as well. That strengthened my inner feeling that this is my work.

Looking back at what you said so many years ago, do you have a feeling that today you would say things differently?

When I started reading my own talks for the purpose of editing them I realized that many of them had been inspired. For I would hardly prepare for them, apart from finding some suitable quotations from Sri Aurobindo or the Mother. I knew I had to lecture about chapter X pages Y-Z, but the talk would come spontaneously. That was a period in my life when my mind was at its best for analysis and for expansion of ideas. I have come to the conclusion – with all humility, because being inspired only means being able to receive information without distorting it too much – that this was a commendable work done. But I don’t have that ability anymore. I am definitely a different person now than I was when giving those talks. My mind has matured, but that kind of analytical mind has been lost – or is no longer necessary, as its work has been done. I have since developed a different aspect of my mind, it is now more comprehensive, synthetic and more flexible and embrasive.

So you stopped giving classes?

No, I still give lectures if my health allows, but far less than before and they are vastly different. For example, four months ago I gave a class on one of the chapters from *The Life Divine* to some interested people. We studied that chapter for four months. I was thrilled to read Sri Aurobindo sentence by sentence, gaining a deeper insight, even finding new layers of meaning. My students were enthusiastic as well – ‘You have taught us how to read Sri Aurobindo,’ they said.

For example, the concept of the evolution of the spiritual man has undergone a sea-change in my mind. Previously, I thought in a linear manner – that is, man would become spiritual only after passing through several stages as described in *The Human Cycle*. I now realize that all life, at every moment, moves towards a spiritual fulfillment . It may not be very obvious but that’s the secret of evolution.

Isn’t the idea of publishing books a bit old-fashioned? And then 47+ of them?

Previous generations had no difficulty in taking up the books of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and studying them. But the times have changed. Nowadays, it is almost impossible for many students to take up those voluminous books. They need handholding, and for them, these commentaries are very helpful to get into the structure and thought of the book. If ever they get to the original works, they’ll understand them much better.

Given the cost of the printing and the problems of storage, we only print 100 copies of each book. However, through our app *aurodarshan* we make the books available as downloadable soft copies in Kindle and e-pub formats. This website also hosts some of my articles that were

published over the years, and visitors can listen to some of my talks.

At some time in the past, SACAR was affiliated to the Indira Gandhi Open University, with the idea that SACAR could offer Master and Ph.D. degrees in Sri Aurobindo studies. For various reasons that did not work out. But recently, a Sri Aurobindo Chair was opened at the Pondicherry University.

We are very happy with this development. The Pondicherry University held a seminar on ‘*Celebrating the life and Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo*’ on March 28th, and opened the Sri Aurobindo Chair, which plans to conduct webinars and workshops and offer degrees and diplomas. The Chair is held by Dr. Richa Tiwari, who authored the book “*Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo: Nationalism and Internationalism*” and who did her Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Rajasthan. She is very dedicated to the study and practice of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. At the event, the book “*Sri Aurobindo: An Extraordinary Phenomenon*” edited by Dr. Larry Seidlitz and myself was launched. We are now in the process of signing a Memorandum of Understanding between the University and SACAR.

A few years ago SACAR opened a branch office on the Utility road, to better interact with Auroville. How has this developed?

It hasn’t. We had hoped that we could sign an agreement with the Auroville Foundation that would allow Auroville residents to come and study there, but this did not work out. This idea needs to mature. The office is still there; it temporarily functions as a guesthouse.

You recently went through a severe health ordeal with an open heart surgery. Do you feel you are able to finish all this work?

I trust I will be. The secret of my coming back from the hospital is that I feel I still have some work to do. It is not only publishing these books: my inner growth depends on my work.

In conversation with Carel

Dr. Ananda Reddy is known in Auroville, India and abroad for his lectures on the major works of Sri Aurobindo. He is an alumnus of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Puducherry and received his doctorate on Sri Aurobindo’s concept of Physical Transformation from Madras University. In 1998, he established the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research (SACAR) in Pondicherry, a not for profit charitable trust that aims at promoting research into the thought and vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and of all allied thought and perspectives from other visionaries from different cultures, with the objective to offer a synthetic view of the future. To support the work of SACAR, visit <https://sacar.in>.

STEAM Fest 2023 @ Deepanam

In 2022, Vishwa Chudgar, her husband and daughter spent a month in Auroville, before moving back to the USA. A little over a year later, the family is now calling Auroville home and Vishwa has started the newcomer process. Her daughter was introduced to Deepanam School by a playmate and soon decided she wanted to join Deepanam's 65 students (age 7-14). Here Vishwa describes her experience of the school's recent STEAM Fest.

This was the 2nd year of the STEAM Fest at Deepanam School, and the first one that I was to attend. I expected it to be another Science, Technology, Engineering and Math lab with fun experiments for and by the students. What I saw was a successful endeavour to make anyone of any age fall in love with learning or at the very least, just jump into the fun and play.

The conventional STEM exhibit where students stand around and explain their respective projects was transformed into a scavenger hunt spread over 10 stations, with each station encapsulating one of the projects Deepanam students had worked on this past year. All of us who went to the fest, including Deepanam's own students, siblings, parents, and the wider Auroville community, learned about the STEAM projects by participating in games, activities and challenges that were uniquely designed to highlight each project's underlying theme and concepts.

For those like me, who wonder what is the 'A' in 'STEAM', it is Art. So in the project, 'Fantasy Creatures Unleashed' the youngest students of Deepanam conceived, conceptualized, and created their own fantasy animal. While I enjoyed the artistic expression of the animals, I also found a lot of zoology being covered. The kids had to think of movement, reproduction, protection and respiration features that they would like to give to their animal. At another station, the children had made their own amazing musical instruments from simple, readily available materials. But this was also a physics project, examining how different objects, when aligned in a certain way, create sounds – strings, wind, or percussion.

What I also appreciate about the STEAM Lab at Deepanam is the collaboration between units. The lab is the brainchild of Anupama Balaji of Yuvabe, an Auroville tech and design company, focussed on youth empowerment. And the lab is supported by Yuvabe's young team, all of whom spend their mornings volunteering with different schools and units as part of their daily work service at Yuvabe.

I had the opportunity to connect with Mahavir, the executive at Deepanam, where he explained his belief that education is not about teaching students what to learn, but about creating an environment that fosters the love of learning in the students; where they learn to teach themselves beyond their school years. This reminded me of the quote by Sri Aurobindo – "The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught".

It made me wonder what it would have been like to go to a school where learning was fun and play, where there were no subjects in the 'dislike' column, or perhaps no 'subjects' at all. What would it have been like if my education had been more about exploring concepts, experimenting, making me forever more curious? What if I had had a school like this?

Vishwa



Predator or Prey: Exploring animal food through the game



Engineering Drawing Escapades: Isometric drawing of 3D Shapes



Mega Engineering challenge contender building the tallest tower



Mega Engineering Challenge: competing to build the tallest tower that can stand



Mad Science: Building an atom and evolution timeline

Anna Oijevaar

On April 2nd, Dutch Aurovilian Anna Oijevaar passed away. She was a lively, energetic and much appreciated Aurovilian, who came here first in 1988 and was registered as Aurovilian in 1993. She raised five children, Jonah, Jitta, Ofa, Anan and Anadi, and was one of the main initiative takers of the Auroville Lilaloka resource centre for children that came off the ground in 2011.

Anna's children wrote on 2nd April:

"This morning Anna from Eternity passed away. She would have been 72 this year. Many years ago Anna had a dream of an Island to raise her family, a place of new awakening. A place of youth that never ages, where children could grow up to be their unique selves. This journey led them to Auroville. When she stepped out of the taxi for the first time in Eternity, she knew this was the place of her dreams. Anna and Yuval raised their 5 children there and, with the family, established a beautiful oasis on the beach.

She dedicated her life work to Integral education, to Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the Divine. We are grateful to have had her in our lives and everything she has given to us all. Her family and her extended family in Auroville and around the world will always hold her close to their heart."

Anna's remains were cremated at the Auroville Burial and Cremation Grounds on April 8th.



Maurice Monnier

Maurice Monier passed away on April 13th in his flat in Citadines. His friends at Citadines wrote:

"Maurice was born in Saint-Étienne, France, on June 18, 1938 and would have been 85 in June. In the years 1975-76, he stayed several times at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry before permanently settling in Auroville in 1986-87, where he fulfilled various functions, the main one being to dig wells with the Water Service for the community. Later he participated several years in the Housing Service, after which he actively helped in the development of the unit Aquadyn. His great availability and continuous presence in these services left a lasting impression with those who knew him.

"Maurice has always been an ardent defender of Auroville and was totally involved in the community. His ability to be attentive, coupled with a humorous look at things, made interactions with him enjoyable and rewarding. His generosity and discretion were rare and precious qualities, which undoubtedly had a positive impact on the people who knew him. His sincerity and inner depth were testifying to an authentic and endearing personality."

Maurice's remains were cremated at the Auroville Burial and Cremation Ground on April 19th.



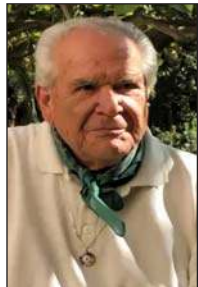
Rafael Vázquez Corona

Rafael Vázquez Corona, named 'Mali' by The Mother, left his body in Spain on April 24th.

Mexican by origin, he was an Ashramite and an Aurovilian.

With The Mother's approval, he founded the Utility community.

The Sri Aurobindo Center in Barcelona has a video where Mali recites, in Spanish, Sri Aurobindo's poem 'The Triumph Song of Trishuncou'. One of the lines is "My spirit shall avoid the hungry tomb..." Knowing Mali's exuberant energy and undaunting spirit, he may have gone far beyond indeed.



20 summit in Auroville

From the 4th-6th April, Auroville hosted a three day Y20 (youth) summit as part of India's G20 presidency. The theme was 'One Earth, One Family, One Future' and participants were addressed by Dr. R.N. Ravi, Governor Tamil Nadu and Chairman of the Governing Board. They also explored different parts of Auroville. It was announced that about 150 international youth delegates would be participating but most came from Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. It is reported that, apart from the initial welcome talk, Auroville youth were not invited.

Tamil New Year

YouthLink invited everybody to celebrate Tamil New Year, also known as "Tamil Puthandu" together at the Youth Centre on 14 April, for an evening filled with cultural performances, delicious food, and a traditional pooja. Aurosangamam also invited all Auroville residents to celebrate the occasion by visiting the World Tamil Heritage Centre to enjoy the cultural programmes and exchange greetings with each other. Events included flower decoration, Kolam-making and a children's dance programme , as well as a community dinner at the Solar Kitchen.

General meeting on town planning

On Saturday 1st April, the RA TDC held a general meeting where they informed the community that an anonymous donor has offered to fund the next steps in town planning in collaboration with the Dreamweaving process and Vastushilpa. The first step is to create a Masterplan 2025-2050, as the current Master Plan is in need of revision and expires in 2025. Those present showed enthusiasm for this way forward with a nearly unanimous show of hands. Subsequently, the RA TDC called upon "everyone to come together to help recreate and sustain a safe central ground for a meaningful and participative planning process to be held with Vastushilpa in the spirit of Dreamweaving".

Concerns about maintenances

The FO FAMC and FO BCC reported that it has been a challenging time for both groups over the last six months as they have been confronted with a number of problems and issues. One is that more than 400 Aurovilians are not contributing their individual monthly contribution of Rs 3800, thus creating a large hole in the income for the community. The groups also note that a large number of unit executives take much higher maintenance than the "standard" maintenance, and it has now reached a level where they have to bring in some regulation. Also, Aurovilians receiving a partial City Service maintenance would no longer be allowed to make extra income by working for commercial units which would exceed a CS maintenance. In response to this announcement, members of the former BCC wrote that "We are concerned that these

communications do not reflect a movement towards the ideals of Auroville, nor an attitude of care for the economic realities that people face at present. Instead, these communications are focussed on imposing rules and conditions. We do not feel that this approach can foster a new economy that embodies the spirit of Auroville." They noted that in the current reality where Auroville is not meeting everyone's basic needs, restrictions on maintenances only makes it harder for those with less financial means to be a part of this community. The FO FAMC and BCC were also concerned that more than half of all existing financial liquid assets of Auroville are parked in bank accounts outside Auroville. They are working on solutions so that Financial Service accounts will have the same functions and facilities as a bank account. When this is ready they will make a push to bring all Auroville financial liquid assets into the Auroville financial system.

Crown road works update

An Aurovilian specialised in construction released another update report on the current status of the Crown Road work. Noting that a member of the FO ATDC had stated that the entire 2.1km stretch of road between PTDC and Youth Centre would be completed by 31st March 2023, he pointed out that "only 47.05 m of precast RCC slabs have been badly laid". In another report he noted that the HT cable recently laid between Auromode and Darkali does not appear to follow the Galaxy Plan, instead "meandering" to follow the existing mud roads and looping around private land. He observes that "it is obvious that this cable will have to be removed later, when the service road will be built. Thus occasioning again wastage of funds and risk to damage the cable."

New executives of Auroville Services

Executives of a number of key Services, including SAILER, Visitors Centre, Security, Eco Service, Auroville Arts Service, ACUR and the Guest House Trust, have been fully or partially replaced with no or minimal notice. Some had been managing their activity for many years. The FO WC and FO FAMC explained that, "Further to the findings of the Systems and Processes Audit, Code of Conduct 2017 and approved by the 57th Governing Board meeting, the Working Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee have jointly decided in discussion with the GB to change the composition of some of the teams looking after the different activities of Auroville. Auroville is at that inflection point where all efforts to support and strengthen the activities for its growth and development need to be augmented. The intent of the team composition changes is to bring in greater accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, responsiveness including upholding the compliances of the laws of India and suggested operational processes and practices." A General Meeting of residents subsequently condemned the way this was being done. The RA WC noted

that, "Due process is not being followed, according to their own Standing Order and the Code of Conduct of 2017 (approved by the GB). There have been no notices given, no hearings, no reasons, no written orders – in short no due process has been followed. Therefore we advise that no one considers handing anything over or stepping down until and unless the following is produced: a resolution from the relevant trust, a resolution from the 'FAMC' signed by the JSFA (Joint Secretary, Finance Advisor to Ministry of Education and ex-officio member of the GB) who is listed in the Office Order appointing the 'FAMC' according to Section 16 of the AV Foundation Act, and an Office Order from the Office of the Secretary." On April 28th, a case was filed in the Madras High Court challenging these appointments.

Removal from ROR

The FO WC announced that they had received a communication from the Auroville Foundation that since Maël had received a Leave India Notice, he would be removed from the Register of Residents (ROR). The RA WC responded that "We would like to remind you all that Admission and Termination of residents in the Register of Residents (and from the Master List) is the exclusive prerogative of the Residents' Assembly as per the Auroville Foundation Act, 1988 (Section 19(2)(a) and the Auroville Admission and Termination Regulations, 2020. Therefore, the Secretary and the individuals calling themselves the 'Working Committee', which were not selected by the RA, cannot make this decision according to the law and to our internal guidelines and mandates."

Voice of Auroville

A new journal, called *Voice of Auroville* has been released under the supervision of the RA Working Committee. It aims to provide well wishers and friends of Auroville across India and the globe with factual updates and crisp articles on what is unfolding in Auroville. The first edition included three articles that illustrate the ongoing challenges and positive initiatives at play in these very difficult times in Auroville.

RA WC files court case against FO WC members

The RA WC has filed a case at the Madras High Court against the 7 members of the FO WC for posing as the "Working Committee". The case is called a Quo Warranto wherein these 7 persons have to prove in the Court that they are representing the Residents' Assembly and have valid grounds to call themselves the "Working Committee".

Auroville International (AVI) Board clarification

The Chairman of the AVI Board made a statement clarifying that the Board is not against the development of the City, nor even against the construction of the Crown Road. However, "it believes in a respectful and collaborative approach, which is apparently supported by the majori-

ty of the community". AVI groups will continue to fundraise for Auroville projects and to provide support and encouragement for those interested to visit and to join the community, despite the difficulties which many Aurovilians are facing at the present time. The Board is happy to support any initiative involving dialogue and collaboration between all sections of the Auroville community.

Shortage of mentors

The Entry Service has issued a call for Aurovilians to offer themselves as mentors of Newcomers. At present, an applicant needs two mentors to start his/her Newcomer process. These mentors are the bridge between Newcomers and the Entry Secretariat and the Entry Board. However, today many applicants are unable to start their Newcomer process due to the unavailability of mentors.

Land acquired

The Land for Auroville Unified (LFAU) group reports that last year 14 new plots were added to Auroville's Master Plan area, and 2023 kicked off with the purchase of two new plots. Both are located in the City area near Certitude, adding 2.20 acres of new Auroville land.

Auroville youth work survey

YouthLink has conducted a work survey youth between 18-30 in Auroville. They received 116 responses from Aurovilian youth, which accounts for 24% of all youth in this age group. The main findings are that Auroville youth are highly educated: 90% have a high school degree, out of which 42% have a Master or Bachelors degree. 77% are working, 14% are studying or are out of Auroville, and only 9% are looking for work. Nobody said that they are not willing to work. For the working respondents, almost 90% of their jobs are in line with their interests. However, 39% do not want to continue their job for the next three years, the main reason possibly being that they cannot sustain themselves on an Auroville maintenance.

Jane Bonda

Just two weeks prior to the planned performance, Bharat Nivas (BN) Trustees sent a letter to Miraculous Productions (MP) to inform them that they will not allow the play 'Jane Bonda' to go ahead at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium as previously agreed. The Trustees stated that they received "significant negative feedback from various sections of Auroville" and that after a meeting at the AVFO – to which the MP team were not invited – they decided to cancel the performance.

CRP3C

The 'CRP3C' (Conflict Resolution Policy, section 3 Coordination) group reminded Aurovilians to report cases of conflict such as violence or threats of violence, substance abuse (alcohol or drugs), psychological health issues, etc. The CRP3C group took shape during meetings in 2020, in

response to a need to support the AV Council and the Working Committee to connect key city services (Working Committee, AV Council, AVSST, Maatram, AVCP, etc.) and resource people, with as objective to build a collaborative and coherent response to these cases.

Coffee Learning Community takes off

On April 22nd, Earth Day, Marc's Coffee Learning Community opened, established on the newly-built first floor of Marc's Café on the Kuiapalayam road. The place offers lectures and workshops on coffee to teach participants if the coffee is good, medium or simply bad. They also learn about the history of coffee, what coffee means in the world economy today, and about the various ways of fermenting the cherries and drying, roasting, and brewing the beans. For more details see Auroville Today # 400, November 2022.

News & Notes Community Edition

As the editors of the Auroville News and Notes had received a message from the AVFO working group instructing them to stop publishing articles from the RA-selected working groups, threatening legal action against the editors if they did not comply, a News & Notes Community Edition has been launched. The Auroville Council explained that the new bulletin aims at being all inclusive and will contain all information from the RA selected Working Groups, as well as those of the FO selected groups, including eventually the reports from the Auroville Foundation Office, the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council. The Council underlined the need to publish the new edition in its integrity as a service to the whole community, stating that it is important as a historical reference and link between all residents, that its content must not be controlled by a faction of opinionated residents, nor by an administration outside of the Residents' Assembly, and that freedom of expression is a fundamental condition for the realisation of a free society, and a pillar for the realisation of Auroville. The bulletin will be distributed online. The distribution of paper copies will initially be limited to collective spaces in Auroville such as the library, restaurants. The weekly has the disclaimer that the opinions and views expressed on these pages are solely those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the editors or the larger Auroville community. The News & Notes Community Edition aims to provide a platform for the publication of diverse perspectives and voices from multiple sources within Auroville. "While we strive to ensure the accuracy of the information presented, we cannot guarantee that all information is free from error or omission. Additionally, we cannot be held liable for any alleged misinformation provided or offence caused by the content published'" the Council clarified. In the event of any dispute, readers are encouraged to consult with the Auroville Council, which reserves the right to suspend the publication of disputed material.


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