

# Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

## On the way

This month is the 35th anniversary of Auroville Today's first issue, which coincided with the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act. The surface history of Auroville Today is quickly told. It began as a response to a request from the Auroville International centres for regular factual information about Auroville, something that was lacking at that time. Quite soon, however, Auroville Today was being read by more and more Aurovillians, eager to find out what was happening in their own community! Over time, a third readership emerged when we started sending issues to embassies and diplomatic legations of Auroville's non-Indian residents, as well as important Government of India offices, so they could better understand a place which doesn't fit into any existing pigeonholes. Important landmarks along the way included a radical change in format fairly soon after our launch, the decision to print in colour which began with the completion of the Matrimandir in 2008, and the launch of a digital issue a few years back. And now another major landmark beckons: the launch of our website.

But there is another Auroville Today story which is more to do with process, and that is one in which a few individuals, with no previous training or experience, took up a task without any idea of what it would involve or where it would lead. Along the way, new people bringing new perspectives joined the team, and previously unconsidered possibilities opened up which led to new ways of looking and understanding not only Auroville but also what Auroville Today could be about, which, we discovered, could be something much more than providing a reflecting mirror.

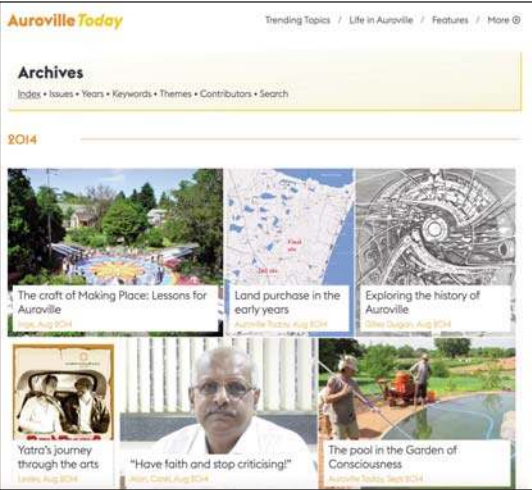
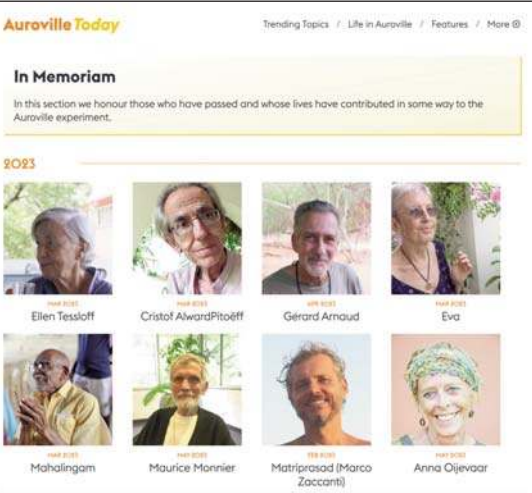
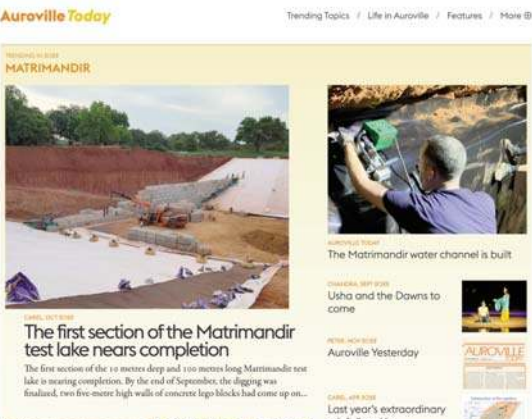
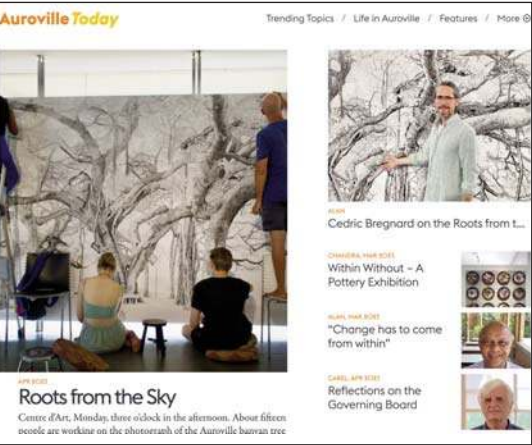
And so we began not only to document events or profile individuals and initiatives, but also to probe beneath the surface, to start asking questions about how we in Auroville are doing things, and why we are here, as well as trying to identify the trends and the deeper currents; and this, in turn, acted as a catalyst, initiating or deepening discussions within the community on important topics. And so Auroville Today became part of the ongoing conversation rather than simply reporting upon it.

Yet something else of what we expressed in that first editorial (how brash we were then!) still holds true. And that is that our prime intention is not to 'push' a particular point of view, but to communicate what is happening in Auroville today in all its rich complexity – the individual stories, dreams, initiatives, as well as the culture, economy, environment, architecture etc. of this place, not excluding the numerous warts – as a means of allowing our readers to experience something of this extraordinary, ever unfolding, experiment.

And so our work, both as individuals and as members of the Auroville Today team, is never done. We are always, like Auroville, 'on the way'.

Editors

## Pages from the new website



## The new Auroville Today website

Over the past year, a small team – Pranav, Elaine and Aishwarya – has worked tirelessly to create an impressive website for Auroville Today which incorporates the latest technology and design features. Here a team member explains why an Auroville today website is needed, what its most important features are, and how it might develop in the future.

### Why does Auroville Today need a website?

In November 2023, Auroville Today commemorates its 35th anniversary. For the last 35 years, the Auroville Today team has produced a monthly magazine. They comprise over twelve thousand articles and many thousands of images. These materials constitute an historic document of the 'Foundation years' and offer an unprecedented view of life in Auroville.

In the last year, a small team has worked to digitise and contemporise these materials, and through the new Auroville Today website we are happy to now offer these materials worldwide – for free. We hope this web-based offering will reach hundreds of thousands of people – even millions – and share with them the creative spirit that has blossomed in this remarkable place.

And what does Auroville Today have to offer to Auroville itself? It offers a recollection of the past, our shared heritage and our memories. It offers a record of all we have been through – a record of shared passions, hardships and joys, and meaning and purpose, as well as a sense both of the eternal and of the ephemerality of things. And through this it offers a message of hope that the current challenge, like those of the past, is transient and will ultimately yield to what is fundamental and real.

### What are the most important features of this website?

The homepage interface of the Auroville Today website has been designed to provide visitors with a well-rounded selection of content. Here, you will discover a blend of recently published articles, as well as those that have gained popularity and are currently trending among our readers.

Within the Auroville Today website, you'll discover three distinct interfaces, each dedicated to providing a unique perspective on life in Auroville. These interfaces are "Select Features," "Life in Auroville," and "Trending Topics".

"Select Features" offers a selection of articles with an emphasis on in-depth exploration and insight that delve into aspects of life within the Auroville community.

"Life in Auroville" presents a cross-section of articles that provide a view of daily life, traditions, and experiences in Auroville. It's your gateway to understanding the heart and soul of this unique community.

"Trending Topics" showcases articles currently generating buzz and discussion within the Auroville community and beyond. It serves as a real-time window into the most relevant and engaging topics that are shaping the discourse in Auroville today.

Through the dedicated "In Memoriam" interface, we commemorate the legacies of those who, in their own unique ways, have advanced the ideals, spirit, and vision of Auroville.

The "Auroville Today Archives" interface features an extensive catalogue of articles. It categorises articles by a variety of parameters, including issues, years, themes, keywords, and contributors. This meticulous curation allows readers to explore our extensive archive with ease, delving into specific areas of interest or tracing the evolution of ideas over time.

The archive also offers an advanced search feature, allowing users to comb through millions of words and pinpoint and find specific keywords and phrases. Additionally, these materials are published under a "Creative Commons 4.0 License" – essentially, a permissive and open-access license granting individuals the freedom to utilize these materials as foundations for their publications, research, and more.

### How might it develop in the future?

Currently, ten years' worth of materials is available on the website. Over the coming months, materials going back to 1988 will be gradually published, making them readily available to a global audience, completely free of charge. We will publish newer issues on the website in the future.

Our overarching aim is to enhance the practicality and usefulness of our resources, particularly for students and researchers. To achieve this, our plan is to continuously enrich our corpus, making our articles more accessible and easily discoverable for those seeking knowledge within our expanding collection.

Contemplating the long-term horizon, we see exciting new vistas open up for Auroville Today. For instance, we may envision establishing a mixed-media team capable of producing audio and video content that complements our traditional print publications. These multifaceted approaches are some of the ways in which we can improve our storytelling and expand the frontiers of Auroville Today's creative vision.

The link for the new website is: <https://auroville.today/>

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# The Matrimandir lake controversy

In our July issue, we reported on recent developments on the site of the Matrimandir lake. These included the excavation of section two of the lake, which will be 250 metres long, more than twice the length of the existing test lake. This has involved, among other things, the transplanting or cutting of a considerable number of trees, some of which were many years old.

Unsurprisingly, given the recent history of tree cutting for the Crown, this elicited strong resistance from some residents. In fact, when the extent of the tree cutting became clear, a small group came together to protect the remaining neem tree on the old viewing point (the new excavation required the old viewing point to be demolished), and two Aurovilians caused a legal notice to be sent to the Matrimandir executives and another Aurovilian, warning them that in pursuing this work they were in “Willful and wanton violation of the judgment of the Hon’ble National Green Tribunal (NGT) dated 28.04.2022 in OA No. 239 of 2021”. This judgment, which is being appealed, directed the Auroville Foundation to prepare a township plan and obtain mandatory environmental clearance for any major infrastructure work in the city area, with the exception of the construction of the Crown Road.

The legal notice called on the Matrimandir executives and additional individual, to stop all further tree felling and other activities in the Matrimandir area until environmental clearance is obtained in compliance with the NGT judgment, failing which appropriate action would be taken to punish them for contempt of the NGT judgment.

Predictably, this deepened divisions in the community even further. While attendees at a residents’ meeting in Kalabhumi applauded this legal initiative, which, it was emphasised, was taken on behalf of many residents, the Foundation-supported Working Committee wrote, “The sheer arrogance of this attempt to intimidate and force the executives to stop all activities in the Matrimandir area together with an ignorance of the process that is unique to Matrimandir, is deplorable and to be condemned ... We herewith state our full support for the Matrimandir Team and the progress that they have made and wish them all success to carry out what is necessary for the progress of the Lake work along with Michael Bonke and team.” (The Matrimandir executives have a plan to finish the Matrimandir, including the gardens and the lake, by The Mother’s 150th birth anniversary, February 21st, 2028.)



Placing the first underwater cushion for storing drinking water in the lake

The tree cutting was the catalyst which prompted new discussions about the Matrimandir lake. However, controversies regarding the lake are nothing new. Over the years, questions have been raised about its size, depth, shape, aesthetic and its function, about how to fill and seal it, as well as its impact upon underwater aquifers and the bioregion. Some people have even questioned whether there should be a lake at all, in spite of Mother’s clear indication that it should be there at some point.

There was much interest, therefore, in what Michael Bonke who, for many years, has financed research into the lake, would say in his presentation of the present work and future plans for the lake when he addressed an open meeting on 19th September.

## The first lake presentation

Michael began by presenting what he said was Mother’s ‘master plan for Auroville’, dated 25th June, 1965. The sketch showed a central island and circular lake, as well as the four zones and a hill adjacent to the lake. Michael pointed out that we



Excavating the next section of the lake

had been discussing many different versions of the lake for the past 30 years, but now there was a realization that the lake depicted in Mother’s sketch, a “clean geometrical ring of roughly uniform width”, was the most practical solution.

Meanwhile, his team had discovered practical functions they had not thought of before, including the possibility of underwater storage of drinking water and creating another elevated lake to buffer solar energy [see *AV Today* # 407-8 for more details].

Then, referring to the suggestion that peninsulas be part of the lake’s design, as envisaged by Roger, he explained that a circulating current, driven by wind, is necessary for underwater biology, specifically to oxygenate the depths where sunlight cannot penetrate, and peninsulas and islands would interfere with this current. A clean geometrical shape was optimal for the current flow, while the ten metres depth was necessary to limit the percentage of evaporation.

The question and answer session that followed focused on certain issues. One was technical feasibility. Regarding sealing the lake, Michael pointed out that the HDPE foil chosen was the most effective

But what about the test lake? asked another Aurovilian. When the test lake was constructed it was understood that certain parameters would be evaluated before the next phase of construction began, but this has not happened. The test lake has not been filled to anywhere near its capacity yet, so why the haste to begin the next stage of the lake?

Michael replied that some of the test results were already very clear, and the efficacy of HDPE had been proven elsewhere, while certain parameters could not be tested until further sections of the lake had been constructed. “The bigger the lake grows, the more we will find out. Once the lake is completed we will have totally different conditions... If we wait for 3-4 years to test each section, it will take many more years. Let’s complete it and then we will see.”

“Why have the results of your research not been shared more widely with the community?” asked another attendee. We would like to see the scientific reports you are using, she said, because this project has immense implications for the city’s energy and water. Michael replied that his team has shared all this information for over 25 years with Town Development Committees. “We are getting fed up after 30 years of explaining again and again. At some point we just have to do it, and then we will see.”

While appreciating his work and commitment, “You need to accept there is a softening and regulatory power in community, and if it had been included more we could have avoided grave mistakes,” remarked another Aurovilian.

“I think you know my opinion about the process”, responded Michael. “Everybody just wants to be heard and to block: the process doesn’t serve any purpose but blocking. There are 101 opinions, but one is coming from The Mother, so that has more value.”

“But is this particular concept coming from Mother?” asked another attendee, who pointed out that our daily challenge was how to translate Mother’s vision into reality. “Sketches are sketches, not an accurate picture. In the sketch you showed the zones are circles, but this hasn’t happened, and Mother changed from year to year.”

At this point Michael had to leave to catch a plane. But he promised he would address any further questions at a follow-up meeting in October.

## Responses to the presentation

Not everyone was convinced by Michael’s explanations. In a resident’s open letter to Michael Bonke, written after the presentation evening, it was asked that he consider criteria other than speed of construction, such as responsible planning, trust, collaboration, beauty, and whether the proposed lake plan really is in accordance with Mother’s vision.

In a subsequent General Meeting on the lake, Jan Imhoff, a structural engineer who has been involved with the construction of the test lake, also expressed concern about the truncation of the test lake studies. He pointed out that the building application for this lake specifies a set of parameters that should be tested once the test lake is completed, and only after these have been evaluated and, if necessary, modifications made to the overall design would the next stage of the lake begin.

But the Matrimandir executives did not follow this, and went ahead with the next phase of the lake

before the tests could be completed. Some of the questions which remain to be answered, he said, include whether the plastic lining can withstand the depth of water; if there is leakage how will it be detected and repaired it, and how will the lake be filled?

“There have been several suggestions about how these can be solved, but to date there is no practical or realistic solution,” he said, emphasising that these questions should be answered before starting the next section of the lake.

Giulio, a geologist, pointed out that, by his calculations, it would be impossible to fill and replenish a lake of this size by a combination of direct rainwater and run-off, even from a wider catchment area than the oval, and there are doubts about when, or even if, the desalination plant will be operational. (Another resident subsequently calculated that if the present planned water catchment area was doubled it would take over 21 years to fill the lake with rainwater alone.) So where will the rest of the water come from until that happens? He emphasised that we must never be tempted to use groundwater to help fill the lake because this would have a huge impact upon the aquifers which supply not only Auroville but the larger bioregion.

He was also concerned about the danger of subsidence of underground aquifers as a result of the pressure of the lake and of the huge hill that would be constructed adjacent to it. And once an aquifer collapses, it is irreversible. “For me,” he said, “this risk has not been properly evaluated”.

Narad was given the work of building the Matrimandir gardens by Mother in 1967. “Today,” he said, “what is planned for the lake is the least beautiful option: no cascades, waterfalls, and where are ledges for water lilies and lotuses in this very severe design? Couldn’t there have been a way to keep the spiritual atmosphere of trees and not cut them down so viciously?” Mother, he said, spoke so much about the importance of beauty, but “I don’t see much beauty there now”.

Gilles, our in-house historian, gave a brief overview of what Mother had originally wanted: an isolating zone around the central Park of Unity, which she described to Satprem as reservoirs to supply the city and to Huta as a lake. “But I don’t find the drawing Mother made for Huta relevant in the present circumstances because Roger was not informed of Huta’s drawing when he made his plans, which are quite different from Mother’s original conception.” Nevertheless, Mother approved Roger’s plan which is why, said Gilles, we should beware of making dogma out of her original ideas.

John Harper, one of the present Matrimandir executives, pointed out that a “huge” number of trees had been transplanted from the newly excavated lake area, with, so far, a more than 80% success rate. He felt that the lake issue was coming to the Matrimandir for a wider resolution of the difficulties confronting the community and “we have to strive to act from a true synthesis of views”.

## The questionnaire

At the end of the meeting, participants were requested to send feedback on their views and on questions which still need to be answered by filling in a questionnaire. These would be communicated to the Matrimandir executives, who would be

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requested to address these concerns at the next open meeting.

273 people filled in the questionnaire. The main concerns that emerged were: the next phase of implementation is going on without completing the test lake and carrying out a review; a lack of planning concerning water management which will impact the wider bioregion; and lack of communication and information sharing by the Matrimandir executives and the lake team.

Proposals to improve the situation included overwhelming requests for the Matrimandir executives to respect their mandate as representatives of the community and to listen to other voices, and for the test lake to be completed first and a proper assessment made before further development of the larger lake. There was also a call for an RAD to set minimum environmental standards, such as that no groundwater should be used for the lake project.

Additionally, a group “who care deeply for the Matrimandir, its gardens and its lake”, wrote an open letter to the Matrimandir executives regretting that the participatory process meant to build greater unity in building the Matrimandir had been “aborted”, because the executives “have started to hasten the manifestation of the lake, bulldozing through the existing gardens without any kind of prior consultation”. The letter continued, “We are still hopeful that a collaborative way forward can be found if there is goodwill from all sides. This implies to pause, to sit together and to take the needed time to set (sic) things out.”

The second lake presentation

On 10th October, Michael made a second open presentation about the lake. To begin with he responded to some of the concerns voiced over the past weeks. He re-emphasized that HDPE has a very long lifetime and is chemically inert, and then pointed out that the lining of the lake would not only comprise of HDPE foil, but that this foil would be sandwiched between two layers of geo-fabric with 20-30 cms. of granite chips on top.

Regarding what he considered the remote possibility of leakage, he said it could be detected by humidity sensors below the foil, or by aerial remote sensing – both of which options they are currently considering – but that it would also probably be visually detectable as the dust layer above the granite chips would be disturbed at that spot. As to sealing a leak, he pointed out that a small leak could be repaired by gluing an HDPE or plate over it, and if a larger repair was necessary that section of the lake could be isolated and pumped dry using the prefabricated ‘lego’ walls.

He also emphasised that open water storage in the lake was more cost-effective and cheaper than constructing underground tanks. Financially, the desalination of water using green energy would be slightly cheaper than water harvesting, but both would be necessary to supply the lake.

As to the big question of whether or not work on section two of the lake should be suspended until all the parameters to be tested in the test pond had been evaluated, he was clear that “We have to continue”.

This is because, he said, the test pond has “fully answered” that we have the right material to seal a water body; that, with the help of an expert from Germany, we can handle the foiling; and that we can build the lake in sections. Questions which remain unanswered include how to maintain the water quality and required oxygen content to create a healthy underwater biotope, as well as how to control possible algae growth, but these can only be answered when the lake is complete. The test pond will provide no useful information about this now, he said. Therefore, “We cannot see one single reason why we would get wiser while waiting.”

He concluded his talk by describing how the planned desalination plant could be a model for India because it would run on green energy and incorporate technologies which would prevent the brine produced from negatively affecting the seabed.

The following question and answer session ran for almost three hours, indicating the level of interest, and, sometimes, heightened emotions, raised by the topic of the lake.

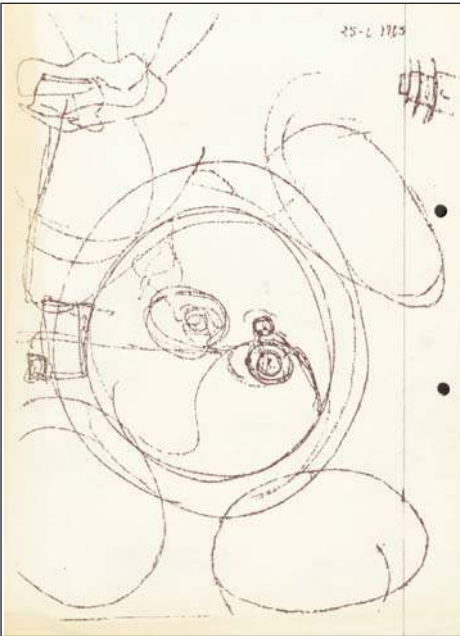
Responses to the second presentation

Some of the questions focused on technical issues. For example, Michael was asked if Harald Kraft’s plan for the lake and water management in Auroville had been put aside. Harald had suggested that the lake be lined with specially prepared clay, that water catchment should be the highest priority and that the water collected should be stored in the top aquifer rather than in a lake. Michael said now they were not following Harald’s concept. Now they favoured HDPE foil over clay as the lake lining because it had performed best in the tests which

included Harald’s clay option, and they were not considering direct infiltration into the aquifer because this could become saline soon and also because this aquifer can be drawn upon by outside interests. He also felt that desalination as well as water catchment would play an important part in providing the water for the lake.

Jan still didn’t agree that the test lake has been fully tested. He felt it was essential to test the sealant at a full pressure of ten metres, while they could only test it at half that pressure now. He said they have also not yet tested the water quality, but he had noticed that the top layer in the test pond heated up considerably and there was no fish or plant life. He was also unconvinced that it would be easy to detect leakage in the large lake. While applauding the scientific work which had gone into the present concept, he proposed stopping work on the next phase for one year, by which time the monsoon rains would have filled the test pond closer to capacity.

Michael replied that solutions can be found without stopping the work. Stopping the work now would mean a huge waste of resources and impetus, and, regarding the lining, HDPE has been successfully employed in many water bodies deeper than 10 metres.



The Mother’s 1965 sketch showing a central island and lake

Michael favours a centralised water-system with a run-off harvesting system and delivery system for the whole city because this, with the addition of a desalination plant, would, according to him, “be much more cost-effective than individualised run-off collection and storage.” However, more than one Aurovilian was concerned by the complexity of such a system where every piece needs to work perfectly and interface faultlessly with the rest, while a mistake in a project of this magnitude could have huge repercussions.

The question of aesthetics, about how the lake would look, was another concern raised. “Technology is meant to be at the service of something higher, of spirit,” said one attendee. “And one of these fundamental principles is beauty, which I don’t feel is there at present.” It was pointed out that The Mother insisted on beauty and envisioned running water in the lake area, yet this design has no running water and a somewhat antiseptic feeling to it (Michael mentioned, for example, that leaves should be prevented from falling in the lake as this would negatively affect the water quality).

Some attendees also seemed to feel, although this was hardly expressed, that Michael and his team are viewing the lake from an exclusively technological perspective, and not considering the subtler aspects of what a lake surrounding our spiritual centre should represent and embody.

Michael agreed that “the beauty has not yet come; we have not touched this yet”. He mentioned that Mother had had a vision of tall trees in the park outside the lake, but his team has not fixed on any design for this area as they are focused upon making the lake. “The excavation for Matrimandir was also not beautiful,” observed another attendee, “but look at the final result. I’m sure it will be the same for the lake.”

Another area of concern was who would manage and be financially responsible for a project of this scale and complexity. Michael stated that “the financial liability of Auroville for this project is zero”. He pointed out that Auroville has given nothing towards the construction of the lake so far, that it had been financed through the resources of his company, Varuna Pvt. Ltd., and Varuna would continue to be responsible for the construction of the lake and running of the desalination plant.

However, the planning and construction of a centralised water system in the city would be the responsibility of the Town Development

Committee, not Varuna. He also pointed out that managing the completed lake would be much easier and require far fewer human resources than are presently required for looking after the Matrimandir gardens.

By far the majority of the question and answer session, however, was devoted to process, to the way in which Michael and his team is proceeding with the project. Michael has never made a secret of his aversion to Auroville’s community process, which he believes deadens initiative, needlessly complicates design (“if too many people are designing something then you over-design things”) and in the end blocks action. Therefore, in regard to the lake, “If we can go full speed it will go fast: if we have to discuss everything it will take another 50 years. For twenty five years we have been discussing it. Now we just have to do it.”

A number of attendees supported him in this, along with his evaluation of the shortcomings of our collective process. “The meaning of the community process is to block,” said one. “In the process of implementing Mother’s vision we discover things, beautiful things are revealed to us. So we should go on with the lake, and it will be beautiful.”

However, another attendee stressed that Auroville is supposed to be a collective experiment, so does Michael’s go-it-alone attitude fit with this? Yet another said Mother made Auroville for human unity, so “we can’t bypass it now, it has to manifest. Human unity is a must at all stages.”

One Aurovilian admitted that our process of everybody having their say can be messy and long-winded, but when it works there is a feeling that Mother wants it. “We can always enlarge our sense of beauty by working together,” said a designer. “People may bring some limitations, which can be frustrating, but this can be a stepping stone to a beauty which was previously unknown. In the past, there was much collaboration in the building of the Matrimandir, but not now. Now is the time to open the door for collaboration for the lake, because it concerns everybody, and many of us can contribute a lot.”

Earlier in the meeting, Michael had been asked to clarify his official relationship with Auroville and with the Matrimandir, and he responded, “As to what concerns the work, especially for the Matrimandir, I am proud to say that it is absolutely deregulated. I have no title, no contract, I am not an Aurovilian, I am absolutely nobody and that’s why I can do what I want.” Later, however, he qualified this statement by clarifying that “We are always open for participation and discussions as long as they are focused on the topic”. And he pointed out that he is simply one member of a larger team. “There is no hierarchy, it is unregulated, I can’t just do what I want. There is no friction and we do it together.”

Finally, a long-term Aurovilian reminded the gathering that in the process of constructing the Matrimandir, at every step of the way some people were objecting, but others believed in Mother’s dream, and this is why it was completed so beautifully. Now is the time, she said, to put our trust in the vision developed by Michael and his team on the basis of indications given by The Mother, and to let them get on with the work.

Some reflections

There was no formal outcome of the meeting. At one stage, Michael asked for a show of hands to indicate who thought the work should be continued, and who would prefer it to be stopped for the moment to allow more research and discussion.

The room was more or less equally divided. In some ways this was unsurprising, because the lake controversy has revealed, once again, deep divisions within the community, some of which replicate those which emerged during the Crown controversy. On one side, for example, there is the fear that if the work is stopped now, valuable time and energy will be lost in creating Mother’s city, and on the other side pain that a beautiful environment has been devastated and fear that a project of this scale may involve major problems which may have repercussions we are unable to cope with.

Bubbling below the surface are other differences. Opposition to present plans for the lake also involve a certain suspicion of technological solutions which may end up creating a somewhat sterile aesthetic unsuited to the Matrimandir, which is why some would prefer to pursue Harald Kraft’s more ‘natural’ solution. Others believe that the extensive research conducted by Michael’s team has revealed the option which serves Auroville best in terms of providing water for our future needs and protecting us against saline intrusion in the aquifers from which Auroville and the surrounding villages draw their water. And they have no doubt that the finalised lake will be beautiful.

Then again, there is the fear of the over-centralisation of our water supply, because if there is a major failure it will have much more impact than in a decentralised system. Linked to this is the concern about putting too much power in too few hands. On the other hand, it is pointed out that such a system is far more cost- and energy-effective, as well as equitable, than individually managed systems.

Above all, some fear that we are losing our right to have a say about what happens at ‘our’ Matrimandir, the soul of Auroville, for there is a sense that Michael’s well-financed and organized team has the capacity and energy to make major changes to its environment, and is presently doing so, without feeling a need to involve or consult the larger community. The speed and scale of the present work is also overwhelming to those used to the more sedate pace and human-scale development of Auroville over the past 50 years.

Against this, his supporters point to Michael’s undoubted dedication to the Mother and to implementing what he believes is her guidance regarding this project, which they see as crucial for completing the Matrimandir. And, like Michael, they have grown tired of the slow pace of development of the city.

It cannot be accidental, as John Harper pointed out, that all these differences have now become focussed around the Matrimandir, for the Matrimandir is a dynamic spiritual centre which exposes and throws our differences into stark relief in order that they may reach a higher resolution. And Sri Aurobindo reminds us that the greater the contradictions, even to ‘irreconcilable opposition’, of the elements involved, the “stronger is the spur and it drives towards a more subtle and puissant order than can normally be the result of a less difficult endeavour”. This is why many of us believe that if something can be resolved at our centre, in a truly integral way, much else will be positively affected.

Mother once described the spirit of Auroville as “the art of building unity out of complexity”. This, she said, is very difficult because it involves everything and everybody finding their true place.

The lake is giving us one more opportunity to truly understand what this means and then to manifest it. Are we ready?

Alan



A boar tests the test lake

PHOTO: KRIPA



# Potters' tales

**Long-term Aurovilians Gillian, Roy, Angad and Adil met in Adil's house in late September. Angad and Adil are working potters, Roy a former potter and Gillian, Roy's partner, ran a crafts workshop and has been active in promoting village clean up and cycle path initiatives. During a convivial evening they discussed pottery, the current state of Auroville, why they came and why they are still here.**

*Why did you come to Auroville, Roy?*

**Roy:** Everybody has an incredible story, otherwise they wouldn't be here. I had an experience where I went into a non-mental state where the aspect of the mind that makes comments stopped. I had the experience of a consciousness observing; it was like I was in contact with the *purusha* for a moment. I decided at some point then that I wanted to practice yoga to find out what this was.

I found a yoga teacher who knew about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and then I decided to join a spiritual community to continue my practice. I went to a bookshop in Harvard Square and picked up a book called *Modern Utopias*. On the cover was the Lama Foundation and on the back was a picture of the Galaxy. So I went off to the Lama Foundation community in New Mexico where I met Ram Dass, among others, and also someone who had been to Pondicherry and visited the Ashram. While he was telling me about it, I suddenly had this vision of an ugly green building with green shutters. I had no idea what that was.

One day I was in a bookstore in New York and saw an advertisement for a ticket to India for \$350. I thought I'd check it out. I went to the travel agency, and said I wanted to go to Pondy. And the woman said 'I've been there, it's great'. She told me that with this ticket I would have to leave in three days.

But I had no visa for India, so the next day I went to the Indian consulate to get one. They didn't want to give it; in fact they tried to dissuade me, asking "But why do you want to go there?" But finally I got it. I left on February 28th, 1971, leaving a chit for my parents saying, 'I'm going to India'.

When I reached Pondicherry, I recognised the big green building with the shutters. And I met the Mother. Originally I wanted to stay in the Ashram, that's why I came, but Navajata said I had to go to Auroville.

I went on a village bus to Kottakarai. When I arrived in Silence community, the sun was blazing, there were no trees, and a big woman in a sari was screaming at a taxi driver. There I met Constance, Iris, Jocelyn, Daniel, Jaap, Diane and others who were creating this community near Kottakarai village.

Auroville in those days was like a train that was moving fast, and I felt it existed like a couple of milliseconds in the future, which made it invisible to the rest of the world. Yet it was so real, this thing that was manifesting. It was so compelling that nobody dreamed of leaving.

*You had the first pottery in Auroville?*

**Roy:** Constance and I started Auroville's first post-Neolithic pottery. I'd read *A Potter's Book* by Bernard Leach, on the artisan traditions handed down by Koreans and Japanese from the greatest period of Chinese ceramics in the Sung dynasty, which got me interested in pottery. Constance who had been living in Kottakarai village had noticed that plastic buckets and *kujas* were beginning to show up in the local villages, and he foresaw that the village potters would disappear unless they could start producing more durable products. So, our idea was to hire a village potter and teach him how to do glazing. As it turns out the village potters are quite independent and would not be convinced to join our project. In the end, that idea didn't work out but we decided to start a pottery, anyway.

At that time, I had asked my father for some money to a house. Constance convinced me to build a pottery instead and then the pottery would build my house. Meanwhile we tried to get additional funds first from the Tamil Fund for Rural Development. This didn't work out either, but we did manage to get a grant from a Canadian fund to get us started.



Roy (left) and Constance fire up the first kiln

Neither I nor Constance knew anything about practical pottery, although Constance had been a ceramics enthusiast since 1964. As Golden Bridge Pottery was already there, I started going to Pondy to take lessons from Ray and Deborah. Constance also went



From left: Angad, Adil, Roy and Gillian

occasionally. At that time, they were not producing anything, merely doing thousands of tests with tiles to find the glazes that worked in India. Learning how to create glazes is quite a challenge and I focused mostly on learning how to throw a pot.

As a result, Constance and I decided we were going to do salt glazing because it was the easiest thing to do. We built the first kiln, a small two-chamber affair, in a canyon, which maybe wasn't the best location for a kiln. The first ceramics were primarily hand-built – though we also had a low village-type wheel that one had to squat at.



The first pottery building

We didn't really know what we were doing. In the first firing in 1974, every pot melted: all we had were these ugly green blobs. It was a total disaster. Later Iris, Constance's partner, became quite adept on the wheel, and one of the more successful products of the pottery was a large quantity of different types of beads that were used in jewellery and various creations by Fraternity and others.

Our first pottery building was a basic frame with a tile roof – no walls, no floor. The final pottery was completed in 1976. I designed the all-wood building, inspired by a book on Japanese tea houses, and built it with Daniel, who had studied architecture with Christopher Alexander. Constance added the experimental bamboo-clay-and-fibreglass panels in the wooden framing at the front of the building and made a beautiful teak potter's wheel, which is still in use.

At a certain point, my father sent me another cheque so we could continue. I went to Pondy to cash it and put all this money in a leather bag. Then I went to the bazaar to buy some fruit. In the middle of the bazaar was a totally naked fakir with a large knife through his mouth. Naturally he came right over to me and stood in front of me, and, for an instant I went unconscious. When I came to, the zipper was open, the money was gone, and the sadhu was nowhere to be seen! The next morning, I went to the bazaar looking for the fakir, it was totally empty except for one black cow with a red dot on its forehead which as it walked past me poked me in the arse, so I took that as a message.

That delayed everything for a long time.

We had a few more firings, but the pottery only took off when Patrick and Angad turned up. Angad had been trained at Golden Bridge while Patrick Adamson had studied with Michael Cardew, one of the foremost British potters.

Patrick took one look at the pots I had made and tossed them all in the water. Then he sat down at the wheel and within 20 minutes made a hundred or so perfect pots.

Constance had already left by then, and I left soon after to work at Matrimandir.

**Angad:** I had decided to move to Auroville in late 1978 and used to come and work on getting the pottery building finished on Sundays. The keel had been replaced by tiles but the work hadn't been

completed and it leaked and needed urgent finishing. Patrick came and helped me finish the arch of the catenary kiln I had started building for salt firings. In May, 1981 we fired this kiln for the first time. I continued working there until 1990, making salt glazed wood fired stoneware, then I set up Shilkipa with Michael Hutin. I established Mantra Pottery, where I still work, in April 1994. Over subsequent years, many smaller pottery studios sprang up, both in Auroville and the villages. Most of the Aurovilian potters were trained at Golden Bridge, whose influence has been immense. It's why someone described the Pondicherry area as the 'kashi' of ceramics in India.

*How did you arrive there?*

**Angad:** It's an interesting story. When I was studying at Oxford University in 1973, a group of us would go to a friend's house to watch a regular BBC 2 series on crafts. Crafts interested us because none of us wanted to work in the corporate world. One night there was this film about a Japanese potter, Hamada Shoji, and it blew my mind. I remember saying, 'I could live like this'.

Anyway, in between crazy things happened. I tried to get into filmmaking in the UK. That fell apart, but when I came back to India I thought I'd write a script for a film. I came to Pondicherry because I thought I could use the library and stay quietly writing, but once here I heard there were interesting potters around.

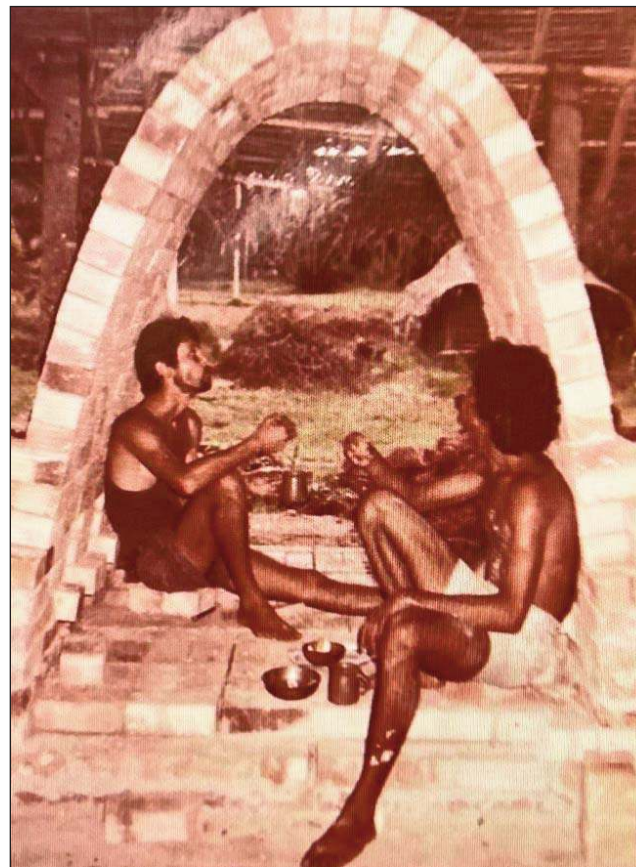
I went to Golden Bridge and met Deborah and Ray. I noticed the studio reminded me very strongly of the film on Hamada but I couldn't remember his name except that he was short, stout, bespectacled and bald. They showed me a book about a Japanese potter, I opened it and saw it was the same guy who I had seen on the BBC. Apparently Deborah, who knew Japanese, had gone to Japan as an interpreter for the writer who was researching Hamada, and now Ray had built her pottery wheel space to look like Hamada's.

Within a couple of hours, I asked if I could learn. Some days later, Ray met me on the beachfront and said if you want, you can come. I spent 3 ½ years there. Michel came about six months before I left, and many other Auroville potters have learned there since.

Actually, I had come to Pondy earlier with my mother, who wanted to come to the Ashram. When I asked her who the guru was, and she told me it was a French woman, my first reaction was 'Mum, you've lost it.' I thought it was just another of those scam gurus.

Anyway, we came here in September, 1971, and I was overwhelmed by the atmosphere. I had *darshan* with The Mother, and within three or four days I got a scholarship to Oxford: if I hadn't got that I probably would not have gone to the UK, not have seen that programme, not have met Deborah and Ray etc. It was a series of so-called coincidences, but I know in hindsight it was all arranged, including the fact that I'm still here. If I look back, I can't blame anybody but the Mother for all this!

*continued on page 5*



Patrick Adamson and Angad under the catenary arch, 1981



continued from page 4

**Adil, you also learned at Golden Bridge. What brought you there?**

**Adil:** I came in 1996 to get an application form from Ray for a colleague in Bombay. She had Ashram connections and wanted to come and learn pottery. I got the form and went back to Bombay and my life as an architect. The friend did not fill up the form for a year, so I said if you don't fill it up, I will fill it up, just to bug her. She wasn't interested any more. So I filled it up and posted it to Ray. I got a succinct reply. 'Course starts the first Monday of March. Be there!' I was!

During 1998 and 1999, I had an architecture project in Bangalore from my Bombay office. So I used to travel to Bangalore to meet my staff every fortnight, and in between study ceramics in Golden Bridge Pottery, where I stayed for 2 ½ years.

When I came to Auroville I worked with Angad for three months, and later at five or six different Auroville pottery studios. One of those was Mandala pottery where I later worked part-time, spending the other half teaching arts and crafts at Transition School for 2 1/2 years.

My Entry Group experience was very funny. At my interview, Nolly asked me what I wanted to do here and I said 'pottery'. She said, 'No, we want you to do town planning', as she knew that I had a Masters in Urban Design from the U.S. I smiled and said, 'You can't force me to do this'. Then she said, 'Ok, you can do pottery, but you have to make tiles for everybody's house in Auroville. We are building a lot of homes in Auroville these days'. I said, 'What?!' Then they relaxed and started laughing.

One of the things people ask me is why I stopped architecture. Sadly, I can't pretend there was any sudden flash of light that made me stop architecture. It was a very smooth transition, there was no, 'this is my real calling' moment. I just felt I couldn't go back to my old life. After a couple of years, Anamika and Chinmayi offered to have me become a co-executive at Mandala, and I've been there since.

I guess I didn't come here for The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. I came for clay, but along the way everything else rubbed off on me, happily! I was gifted *Savitri* on my birthday in 1998 and that has left an indelible impression; I am often scribbling quotations from it on my clay-work and paintings.

**Over the years, the Auroville potteries have helped village potters.**

**Angad:** We trained a lot of village potters. When somebody asks me what the purpose of the pottery is, I say it is to teach local people a respectable craft. The recruiting field in my pottery was kids who failed 10th standard, whose parents had no more money to educate them, and who didn't want to become mason helpers and stand in the sun all day being yelled at. I've trained a lot of them and now they make a decent living. It's one of the things I'm proud of. Our pottery is not making a lot of money but that was never the intention.

But still, if we in Auroville didn't charge what we do, if we lowered our prices by 20%, the village potters could not afford to work. So when people complain about our pricing, we've actually left them space to exist, and I think that is very good.

**But isn't there an issue with village potters copying Auroville potters' designs?**



Lotus and dragon fly platter in celadon, Mantra, 2016

**Adil:** Yes. People come to the Visitors Center boutiques, buy one piece, then take it to a village potter to make multiple copies for much less, never mind quality control. This has been happening for the last 10 or 15 years. Things that are standard are copied blatantly.



Dragon vase salt-glazed, 1987, Kottakarai Pottery

**Angad:** But it's not just outside entrepreneurs who are the problem. I had an issue with an Aurovilian manager who liked a diffuser that we made. He told me he wanted to buy the design so I couldn't sell the diffuser anywhere else. I refused, saying that if he bought everything we made he would have exclusivity anyway. So he said he didn't want it that way and, anyway, it would be out of fashion in two years. Thirty years later, it continues to sell very well!

**So what is the solution to the copying problem?**

**Adil:** There comes a point when you say nothing is original really, and move on. We at

Mandala keep ahead of the pack with new looks and designs all the time. Also, nobody copies our murals and sculptural work because there's no big market for that.

**All of you have lived here for a considerable number of years. How do you view the Auroville situation today?**

**Gillian:** It used to be a very sweet community and people were benevolent and full of goodwill, but now on the road it's 'get out of my way'. There's so much aggression.

**Angad:** That's the transition from *tamas* to *rajas*, which mirrors what is happening in India as a whole. When we came to Auroville, India was tamasic, but now it's very different. It's not pleasant but it's a progression which, at some point, will also have to be transcended.



Soda-fired stoneware from Mandala Pottery

**Adil:** At the moment, people are divided into different camps. You can't go anywhere without sensing that, and you can't talk with somebody without looking over your shoulder to see who's listening to you. Even if you are only discussing the weather!

**Angad:** Kids younger than my son used to greet me, but now they don't. That hurts the most.

**Is this new or does it feel like a repetition of an earlier period of Auroville's history?**

**Roy:** Certain things don't really change. For example, the 'quotation wars' have always been here. One of my favourite quotes of the Mother is that everything is as it should be at every moment; and Auroville is for those who think the world isn't as it should be. For me, that's the essence of it. It's all contradictions and each day She had a different vision.

**Angad:** When the IAC members came in 1995, there was a chance that they would underwrite an appeal to the government to buy the land, but in our open meeting with them the only issue that was flogged and flogged was the visa one and no other topic could be aired. We were so obsessed with our own problems that we never asked for their advice and help. We were only interested in 'us', not the larger picture. Over the years, things don't seem to have changed very much. Many people talk about the hardships they overcame to plant trees and create spaces in Auroville, but



Soda-fired stoneware from Adil's 'sweet dreams' series

nobody says we were here by Mother's Grace, and through all the difficulties that Grace was working to help us. There was so much Grace then and now: people got sick and they were looked after in the Ashram nursing home, money always came from somewhere, but nobody acknowledges this. That failure is what is stinging everybody now, because the day you start acknowledging it, that it's not 'our' work but we were merely instruments, then it's easy to accept that progress is continuing.

At the same time, the narrative that says that nothing was done here for 50 years by the Aurovilians is also wrong.

**Gillian:** I never felt the need to shout about what we had done from the rooftops, or to analyse what we have done. If people stopped using their minds so much it would be a much simpler journey. Why does everything have to be analysed to death?

**Angad:** Exactly. If we were using our rationality none of us would be here. I didn't come for any rational cause. After all, I moved to a place where I couldn't even own the pottery.

**Adil:** People don't understand how our Auroville is set up. When I'm travelling, the first thing that people ask about is our financial setup. Nobody understands the fact that I only get a maintenance allowance for all we sell. Not many understand what a grace it is to be here, doing what you love, in a community that nurtures and supports you.

**Clearly, this is why you are still here. But what about the others? What keeps you here?**

**Roy:** I came because I read in *Letters on Yoga* that if you want this transformation, one must be close to the Mother. Of course, that was written in 1936 to someone else, but that is why I came to India, for what Sri Aurobindo calls, "Triple Transformation". All of us thought the same. But this is transformation; it's going as fast as it can, given the conditions.

**Gillian:** I didn't have any formation at all about how quickly the transformation would take. I came in off the road and didn't particularly believe anything. You just live the thing, and you grow through that. And the experience has been so rich. Picking up garbage in the local village can be interesting, even inspiring, but people don't see that. They feel sorry for me when they see me engaged in that. But I say I'm more than OK because Mother's with me, I feel her support is always there. And each person here has their own path to that.

So we are blessed. We could have lived a very boring life elsewhere that would have taken us nowhere.

**Angad:** Every day when I wake up I think how great it is to be here. Even though there are all these strange trips going on at present, nothing will make me change my mind. I have always been absolutely convinced The Mother is completely in charge of Auroville, which is why we should give thanks that we are here. And the more I do this, the better life is.

Alan

## EXHIBITION

# Ikebana: search for the heart of flowers

From 13 to 21 October 2023 the Centre d'Art, Citadines, hosted a very special Ikebana exhibition by Valeria Raso Matsumoto. Valeria studied Ikebana for 10 years in Japan, where she graduated from the Sogetsu school of Tokyo with the stage name Suiren (Water Lily). Since 2001 she has been living and teaching Ikebana in Auroville.

Ikebana is the ancient Japanese art of flower arrangement, intended to instill in the practitioner a deep connection with nature. By the 16th century it had become a Zen practice to purify the heart and mind. In this exhibition, the seemingly simple arrangements of flowers with other natural elements, like stone, leaves and wood (Valeria's husband, Kenji, complemented some of her arrangements with his wooden creations), are actually the result of many years of rigorous study in a discipline which values asymmetry rather than formal order, and where emptiness is a key element in the design.

One important aspect of Ikebana is its ephemerality – today's flowers are gone tomorrow. And this teaches us to live in the



moment and, like Blake's "kissing the joy as it flies", not become too attached to material creations but to embrace change, even decay, as valuable aspects of existence. Hence Japan's

celebration of 'wabi-sabi', or flawed beauty, which values the incomplete, the 'imperfect' and the accidental. In this exhibition it was the dead dragonfly which happened to die beside Valeria's favourite piece, a simple arrangement of blackened custard-apple seeds emerging out of a pot, and which was allowed to continue lying there, its wings casting a rainbow in the sun.

A successful flower arrangement, as the introduction to the exhibition puts it, "brings about a state of serenity and peace to the viewer", something which Valeria feels is particularly important to bring to our community at present, and one of the main motivations for her mounting this exhibition.

The awed silence in which people contemplated these arrangements, and the effusions of deep gratitude in the visitors' book suggest that she fully succeeded in doing this in an exhibition which, in its supreme yet disguised artistry, set a whole new standard for Auroville. It will be remembered for many years to come.

Alan



In 1993 Lyndi Fourie, aged 23, died in the Heidelberg Tavern Massacre in Cape Town, South Africa. Thirty years later, Lyndi’s mother, Ginn Fourie, and the man who gave the orders that resulted in Lyndi’s tragic death, Letlapa Mphahlele, sit together as they lead a workshop titled Equity Matters at Auroville’s Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.

Auroville Today covered this story in 2007 when the pair first travelled to Auroville [Issue 219]. Sitting in the room as a participant whilst Ginn and Letlapa work together is such a remarkable and emotional experience. Their combined presence remains a seemingly impossible, yet evidently possible, example of love and forgiveness. It is rare in life that time stops, the heavens seem to open and something beyond sweeps in. Hearing them tell their story is such a moment and as the saying goes, when they speak you can hear a pin drop.

The pair stayed in Auroville for over three weeks in September, offering the Equity Matters workshops and a public talk in the Unity Pavilion. In each instance, their own story served as a springboard. Through the telling, we witness as the pair’s gentle, light and mutually respectful way of working together.

They demonstrate a new way of being in the world: one where black and white, man and woman, those born into power and those into poverty, mother and freedom fighter, can transcend hurt and oppositional roles to find in the most extreme of circumstances a common unity. They both inhabit and transcend these archetypal roles. Their being among us in Auroville is a reminder of humankind’s healing potential and shared essence.

Why does equity matter

Ginn and Letlapa offer an analogy to explain their focus on equity. If equality is when everyone receives a pair of shoes, equity is when those shoes fit your feet. But even more precisely, “Equity is a listen-

The way of forgiving



Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele

17 years. The ceremony involves a profound ‘spear cleansing’ ritual where the weapons of war are put away and one is washed in herbs. At this meeting, Ginn apologised and asked for forgiveness on behalf of her British ancestors for the way they had treated Africans through slavery, colonialism and apartheid. At the ceremony villagers gave Ginn the name ‘Pheladi’, loosely meaning ‘mother of Africa’ which connected her deeply with the village and Letlapa. During the workshop, Letlapa chuckles when he recalls that Ginn received a louder ovation than he had at this homecoming ceremony.

Systemic Issues

Beyond the personal, the two are strongly motivated by the systemic issues behind the tragedy that brought them together. Injustice, says Letlapa, is universal. He and Ginn use Ken Wilber’s model of the ‘Integral Quadrant’ where we “grapple with our values and beliefs that lead to bias, stereotyping, and ideologies of supremacy in order to establish a collective ‘we’”. In the workshop, examples are studied, encouraging us to notice when injustice happens. Letlapa tells us, “Injustices may differ in degrees; some attract world attention, others are treated as normal.”

One of their responses to injustice is conscious communication, which Ginn describes as a “skill where you can empathically hear each other’s feelings and unmet needs and take responsibility for your own feelings without shaming and blaming others”. She hopes this will enable us “to move from a model of power to one of negotiation of values and beliefs, allowing us to formulate the structures of a collaborative society.”

Ultimately, as Ginn points out, “If you don’t act when you see injustice, nobody will act on your behalf when you are treated unjustly.” She goes on to say, “My deepest regret is that I wasn’t a louder activist during Apartheid, because on the one hand I was fearful of being put in prison. On the other hand there was an element of not knowing what was happening to black people. Did we remain ignorant because privilege was so comfortable? It all seemed so acceptable.”

Forgiving

There is a profoundly spiritual element to Ginn and Letlapa’s journey of conciliation. Ginn says that, over time, her daughter’s murder “plummeted me deeply into loving.” As we sit listening to Ginn and Letlapa at the workshop, that love is tangible. With tears in her eyes, she states, “I can honestly say that whilst my voice may waver and tears come when I talk about Lyndi, it’s not a grief but a joy, a sacred connection, a high vibrational energy.”

At the heart of all they offer, and a constant presence in the workshop, is forgiving. Letlapa describes forgiveness as an ‘inside job’, something very personal and cellular. He quotes the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu describing forgiveness as selfish since it frees us from resentments. It’s clear that this unlikely duo brought together in the most appalling of moments, have through forgiving gone far beyond the surface to a deeper understanding of human unity. “Forgiving

yourself is a more difficult process than forgiving others,” Ginn says, “You have discriminated and treated people as if they aren’t worth anything. You need to grieve your own loss because of what you have done.”

How do we forgive? Ginn says it was a process where she made a principled decision to “give up my justifiable right to revenge” even while feeling her loss and at times howling with grief. Later, Letlapa’s invitation to his homecoming, his softening and opening when they met allowed her “authenticity to meet with Letlapa’s integrity” and that helped to bring peace and conciliation.

Honesty

Both Ginn and Letlapa exemplify an unusual degree of honesty. Ginn says that if she had met Letlapa a year after Lyndi’s death, she would have tried to kill him with her bare hands. Letlapa in his quiet way is almost religiously honest. As the commander behind the shooting, he could have avoided blame, but he does not shy away from taking responsibility, “I feel a greater culpability than the one who pulled the trigger.” They are particularly precise in what they communicate and steer clear of both cliché and feel-good narratives.

The human journey

It bears emphasising that Letlapa is so much more than a recipient of forgiveness. There is a power to his willingness to be accountable, to meet eye-to-eye, with an understated sincerity. His searing honesty, quiet strength, poetic writings and light chuckle indicate a depth. He is possibly, in a mythic sense, everyman; and whilst we don’t share his unique story, we all have a past to take responsibility for.

After he first visited Auroville in 2007, Letlapa says he left a changed person, even adopting a vegan diet for 11 years. He read many of Sri Aurobindo’s books, especially enjoying his poetry and “treasures the dream of a society envisaging a simpler life and a future where some of the things dominating our lives, like money, are not an issue.”

Overcoming polarity

It has been suggested that South Africa’s experience of turmoil during the long freedom struggle has relevance for Auroville’s current polarisation. (See ‘Overcoming apartheid - lessons for Auroville’ on Jay Naidoo’s visit to Auroville in AV Today Issue 405). However Letlapa states that he is “reluctant to give advice because there is much I don’t know about Auroville, except that I hear there are as many stories as people who tell them.” Ginn has observed the deep pain and fear on all sides and a sense of victimisation. “I feel the pain, and I feel it as a human tragedy,” she says.

To the question of how best to heal polarised societies, Letlapa replies, “Perhaps it will sound like a cliché, but building bridges is very important because a bridge covers both banks of the river. Which means it has to be a commitment by a divided nation, community or society, that on my side I will meet you mid-river. It should, in my opinion, start with individuals, who are victims of that polarisation, to extend a hand of friendship. It can come in the form of having a breakfast or dinner together, or it can come in the form of inviting each other to birthday or anniversary celebrations. Both sides should invite. Remember we are not a collective mass but individuals; even at the height of racial discrimination in South Africa, white people would invite black people to have dinner and vice versa. Some people went to townships when they were not allowed. And when you reflect, those dinners are now in the pages of history.”

Both Ginn and Letlapa have generously given of themselves to assist Auroville and individual Aurovilians in our troubled times. Prior to her arrival, Ginn had already offered ten weeks of online training in Conscious Communication to form a resource group that could support the intense weekend workshops.

Their presence has been an invitation to learn more about the ‘inside job’ of forgiving and to understand the systemic contexts that lead to social polarity. As they have walked down the road of healing, they have embodied some of the bridge building we in Auroville have ahead of us if we are to individually and collectively find our human unity.

Peter

To watch a film of their work visit <https://www.foranewworld.org/material/films/beyond-forgiving-full-movie>



The Way of Forgiving workshop

ing for needs.” As Ginn points out, “You can’t supply people with shoes till you know their size and what type of shoes they need.”

To further extend their own analogy, both Ginn and Letlapa have now grown accustomed to walking in each other’s shoes. Ginn, for example, is quick to contextualise that Letlapa became a commander of the Pan Africanist Congress freedom fighting force “as a result of the Apartheid system where his people suffered great loss, including many mothers losing their children.” This is but one instance where the pair have come to recognise and appreciate what the other has lived through.

As we struggle in Auroville with ongoing communal hurt, ugly polarisations and painful alienations, Ginn and Letlapa model a different outcome to our tumult, one where human unity is achievable - the very human unity that is the lodestar of Auroville.

Shared Humanity

When Ginn was finally able to meet Letlapa, nine years after Lyndi’s death, she started by saying that she forgave him. Hearing this, Letlapa felt such relief at having his humanity instantly and powerfully restored, as if by a bolt of lightning. Although the terrorism charges against him had already been withdrawn by the courts, the personal, human intent of Ginn’s words was far more meaningful than a legal proclamation.

Letlapa later invited Ginn to accompany him when he returned to his village for a homecoming ceremony after having lived in exile for

The sun ray in the Matrimandir inner chamber is off-centre

John Harper is one of the executives of the Matrimandir and published this blog as a personal view.

Sitting in the Inner Chamber this morning I watched the sunray slide across the marble of the Mother’s symbol until it gently touched the white carpet of the Chamber floor.

Of course, the Ray should have been centred on the Globe, not sliding around on the Mother’s symbol. (We are looking for the mechanical or digital cause of this problem, manifesting for about two weeks now, but to no avail so far.)

I thought of my old friend Ruud Lohman. He was always probing the symbolism of Matrimandir, in all its dimensions. Ruud, long gone, would have surely had a lot to say about this recent destabilisation of the Sun Ray.

Clearly, something is amiss.

Perhaps it is reflecting the difficulties and agitation flooding Auroville since many months.

Until recently, a few months perhaps, this stir had not come to touch, visibly, the centre of Auroville. The daily works proceeded quietly, steadily, its gardens always offering a silent evening haven for all.

But recently, with the growing focus on the execution of lake section 2, the energetic swirl of Auroville at large has finally touched the Centre. Perhaps the Centre has silently called it to come close, to embrace and to solve it?

Some say that the conflict in Auroville is between forces that want to build and forces that want to block the growth of the city. Forces that want to block Auroville’s physical manifestation.

My take, rather, is that the opposition is coming from forces that want to block the development of the Auroville Spirit, to prevent the growth of the true Auroville consciousness.

After all, what will be the use of building rapidly a city of concrete and glass? Will that shell then wait for some new, fresh generation of Aurovilians to come and inhabit it, to fill it with the true spirit?

Both are needed now: the physical growth of the city and the growth too, and more urgently, the growth of the true consciousness of Auroville.

Look at the world around: does it need a new city to be built? Even a new green city with all the latest adaptations to the climate crisis will only be one more green city among many now under incubation.

No. Auroville has to be the city the earth needs... the city with a Soul... with a living consciousness of unity. This is the challenge of today.

It is difficult, yes... we each have our position, our conviction of being the holder of the true point of view.... but, as the Mother encouraged us to do so many years ago, we have to strive to act from a

true synthesis of views.

Reaching this truer synthesis (we will not reach the pinnacle of truth right away, of course, but we can make some first faltering steps) we will send out into the world a tiny, but very powerful vibration of the Auroville spirit... and it will find its way.

It is challenging, even frightening, to let go of our mental/ vital positions... it is an exploration into unknown territory...

To let ourselves be led by That... to be led by quiet indications coming from a higher, truer source.

But it is something urgent now, totally urgent, - for ourselves, and perhaps for the world.

Achieving this, I am sure that the Ray in the Inner Chamber will return to its centre.

John Harper

[The heliostat problem has now been solved, eds.]



## 30th Anniversary of the Auroville Choir

This year marks the 30th year of Nuria Casanova directing the Auroville Choir, which had initially been formed and conducted by Pushkar Carlotto in 1991. On 30 September and 1 October the Auroville Choir offered the first of two sets of concerts, featuring a selection of music the Auroville Choir has performed over these last three decades.

The classical evening programme began with the 'Gloria' from the 'Magnificat in G Minor' by Vivaldi. In a piece of unprogrammable synchronicity, as the last whispers of 'Amen' were being sung, a crack of thunder, seemingly directly over the rooftop itself, shook us all and quick as a flash Nuria pointed a finger up to the heavens in divine appreciation. Thereafter, the monsoonal lightning lit its way through many pieces, giving the concert an unearthly accompaniment.

Fitting effortlessly into the stormy weather was 'Northern Lights' by Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo, whose music was set to the Latin text *Pulchra es amica mea* and conveys something of the 'powerful, even terrible beauty' of the Aurora Borealis.



A gentle contrast came from the 'Seal Lullaby', written by Rudyard Kipling and put to music by American composer Eric Whitacre, which was encored at the end.

William Wordsworth's poem 'I wandered lonely as a cloud,' recited by Otto, was accompanied by vocal music for choir composed by Aurovilian Anandi Sala Casanova.

The programme concluded with the 'Earth's Aspiration Chant', a melody of the Mother's arranged for four voices by Nuria. This piece was introduced with the inspiring comment that, "Every time we sing this melody, we feel a strong connection with each other and a common aspiration for a more luminous and conscious life."

As in previous years, the singing was of a high quality with evident dedication from the singers. These concerts are a fine example of Aurovilians coming together for a unifying and uplifting purpose.

Later in the season the Auroville Choir will perform another set of concerts featuring popular songs from their repertoire to again mark and celebrate this 30th Anniversary.

Peter Lloyd

## The Singing Festival

The singing festival, held on the weekend of October 14th and 15th, provided a rich experience showcasing the diversity, community spirit, and individual talents of Auroville.

Veronique and Louis compered the evening with a light touch, helpfully translating some of the foreign lyrics, and even took to the stage themselves. A creative touch was brought by 'Ok' who had crafted oversized upcycled musical note signs from old CDs, each a yard long. These hung over the stage, contributing to a more intimate atmosphere within the otherwise spacious CRIPA hall.

Reflecting Auroville's melting pot of cultures, the festival was a diverse offering not only in terms of performers and musical genres but also in languages, including four Indian dialects, major European languages, Mandarin, and Hebrew.

The format allowed over thirty singers to perform their favourite piece, often with fellow musicians

accompanying them. The musical range spanned from jazz to Baul, and from pop to classical.

Remarkably, the festival featured young children, aged 5, 8, and 12, whose singing abilities defied their ages. And there were older performers demonstrating the 'youth that never ages' including Marlenka and Anandi. Some with a performing past, like Veronique, grew in stature as the lights focussed on them. One young man, Abhi, confessed to being nervous and then commandingly and beautifully sang a Tracy Chapman solo piece 'Fast car.' Irina, a young German singer, dedicated her performance of 'Als ich fortging' to her father, who was listening via a live stream from home and had sung the folk song as an act of resistance against the former East German authorities.

While most performers were Auroville residents, one lady, Praphulla, travelled all the way from Hyderabad to sing a Baul paean to Krishna. Carla's soprano operatic



The finale 'We are the World' sung by the performers

voice revealed her background as a singer and brought the worlds of opera and Handel to life with her rendition of 'Lascia ch'io pianga'.

The performers were skilfully guided and trained by Shakti, who also played the keyboard for some sets. She curated a performance that

left the audience departing with a sense of the enchanting Auroville magic that occasionally envelops us.

In short, the festival showcased the talents of the community, some of which were previously hidden, while others were well-known. Fittingly for Auroville, on both

nights the singers came together to sing a finale of 'We are the World'. As we left, we carried with us a heightened sense of that Auroville magic, making the world feel just a bit more connected than when we arrived.

Peter Lloyd

## IN MEMORIAM

### Pashi Kapur

Pashi left his body on 20th October 2023 at the age of 91, after having dedicated his life to his most beloved idea and project of Auroville.

Pashi's (Prakash Chandra Kapur) life began in Rawalpindi, in Pakistan today, and at a young age left his home to be in Delhi for the historical moment of India's independence. The tumultuous events of that time made him stay back in India.

Life however took him to the United Kingdom for his higher studies in mechanical engineering. Having completed his studies, he returned to India where he worked as a lead engineer in a British firm and lived in Calcutta where he also began a family.

He didn't want his children to have a conventional education and started his quest for a new world. A friend suggested he should visit the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where new experiments in schooling were happening. In an Auroville Today interview in 2016 he recalled "There I met Kireet Joshi, who at that time was the Registrar of the Ashram School, and told him I would like to understand this system of education. He said, 'Go and see' and waved me towards the classrooms. I walked into one classroom and sat at the back. Everybody was quietly reading. Suddenly, a student raised his hand and asked a question. The teacher paused, and then said, 'I am sorry, I do not have the answer. Shall we go to the library and find out the answer together?' "That really hit me: it was so different from the schooling I had experienced."

But still he was not convinced that the Ashram was the best place for his children. However, in 1968 he had the opportunity to meet The Mother. "It was July, 1968 and the time I was given to meet Mother was 7.13 in the morning. I still remember this because it was so damn specific! But at that time I was very reluctant to accept somebody as a guru, so when this friend gave



me flowers to give to The Mother I said 'I don't need these, I am just going for an interview'.

"Finally I was called in, and she looked up. My eyes locked with hers. All I remember after that is that I had my head in her lap and she was stroking it. I don't know how long I was there, but when I finally got up, I was shaking and crying. I walked down to the meditation hall and there I kept on crying.

"This was the moment that decided my life."

After this he met Navajata, who talked about Auroville. "For me, there were no second thoughts; I fell in love with the concept of Auroville and immediately offered to work for it in any way I could."

In 1970, Pashi suggested that the various Ashram-associated organizations around India could initiate karma yoga activities to benefit the society around them as well as contribute revenue for

the Ashram and Auroville. He sent his proposal to The Mother. The Mother sent for him and asked him what it should be called. "I said, 'Auroville service'. Then she took a large sheet and wrote on it, 'Auroservice'. Organizing the activities of Auroservice became one of Pashi's main jobs.

In November 1973, while Pashi was in Assam on Auroservice business, The Mother passed away. "By the time I reached Pondicherry it was too late. She was already in the Samadhi. I cried my heart out because I couldn't see her one more time. Nolini came by and asked why I was crying and I said I could not have Mother's last darshan. He said, 'Don't you see, Mother is always with you?' He put his hand on my head, I closed my eyes and since that moment I've never felt away from her. It's amazing."

In May, 1974 he moved permanently to Auroville where, in addition to his work with Auroservice d'Auroville, he worked closely with Roger Anger and his team: "My relationship with Roger was very close."

Events in Auroville during the 1980s made him start a new life as the Indian representative of an international marketing company. Pashi returned to Auroville on 1st January, 2000. "By that time Roger had also returned and he asked me to come back." Since then, he helped to raise funds for Matrimandir and worked on tax-exemption issues, but his main concern was finding ways to secure the land so that at least the urban aspect of the city can be built. During his last years he worked tirelessly to establish the CIRHU project.

"Above all, my faith in Auroville has never been shaken, I have an absolute faith in The Dream, in the Charter and in The Mother's vision. It has to come because it is what the world needs."

His family, friends and well-wishers are in deep appreciation of his exemplary commitment and dedication to Auroville and The Mother's work. His cremation took place on Monday, 23 October at the Auroville burial and cremation ground.



Study on Auroville’s organisation

Contrary to our announcement in the previous issue, the 650-page study on Auroville’s organization made by Professor Raag Yadava and his team, has not yet been published. We will notify our readers as soon as we are informed when the study can be downloaded.

Heart weaving expansion

Heart Weaving was started in December last year in an effort to deepen our capacity for dialogue in Auroville and to be able to truly listen to each other across differing perspectives and opinions. The process was anchored by Raghu Ananthanarayanan and a cohort of nearly 30 Aurovilians and Newcomers had chosen to be a part of it. Over the last ten months they have been exploring the Samudra Manthan/The Great Churning and enquiring into how this might be playing out inside each of them and, as a result, in Auroville as well. Heart Weaving is primarily a space to support and nurture practice. In the spirit of which, some of them have also made small attempts at enabling deep dialogue and building bridges and brought their learnings and challenges back to the group for everybody to learn from. They are now ready to expand the cirde and bring new members into the process. Any long term resident of Auroville, aspiring for harmony and truly keen on serving The Mother’s Dream, is most welcome to be a part of the journey.

Dreamcatching

Since August 2023 Dreamcatching sessions have begun again after a gap of almost 15 years on different roof tops, every Monday from 6-8 am. It is one of the multi-pronged approaches that were proposed by the Dreamweaving Core Team to unite people around common processes and values. Each session is open to anyone (Aurovilians, Newcomers) and offers an aspirational and safe space to explore “the DNA of Auroville”, in a quiet, non-confrontational and meditative manner.

Self-education programme

From the presentation of the Dreamweavers, a new initiative called the ‘Self Education Programme’ was launched on 12th September. 20 participants split into 5 groups are learning and sharing for 7 weeks about 5 major and often ignored topics of urban design; namely spatial justice, values and urban forms, art and culture, connectivity and access, and density and diversity. The aim is to later present the findings to the community, and the learnings of the group are to be woven in with the other Dreamweaving initiatives.

Integration of Auroville borewells

The FO L’avenir d’Auroville / ATDC announced that the preparation of the development of Auroville-City, planning and development of roads, sectors and facilities has implications for the borewells also. Auroville city has approximately 70 borewells, most of them serving a limited number of residents and services. The FO ATDC will in the coming year integrate 15 to 20 borewells into a common system, run by Auroville Water Service. How, when and in what priority will be published and communicated later. Sharing will decrease the usage per resident significantly, which is needed to preserve groundwater.

AVFO asks for ‘No Dues Certificate’ in order to receive visa

Now residents applying for a visa letter of recommendation (LOR) will not have their request sent to the Foundation Office until they receive a ‘no dues certificate’ from the AVFO ‘BCC’. This is a newly created document which confirms that they are paying their Auroville financial contribution. If it is found that the person has not paid their contribution in full, then the request for a LOR will not be sent until up to three years of ‘back payments’ are collected in full.

As noted by the RA BCC, “It is important to distinguish between a contribution and a tax ... contributions are waived because the individuals are working for free, or previously made large donations to Auroville (and are now aged), or are between jobs and without resources. The current approach seems to be to administer the individual contributions as a tax, without understanding or honouring this human element.” It was also observed that the new policy appears to target only non-Indian Aurovilians who rely on a visa to stay in Auroville.

Satprem update

On 19th June Satprem Maini was notified by the FRRO Chennai that he had to leave the country on or before 1st July, although he holds a valid visa until December 2025, since the Secretary had apparently withdrawn his recommendation to work and live in Auroville. Satprem immediately went to Delhi to meet various high officials who said they would examine the case. However, on 29th September the Under Secretary In Charge, Auroville Foundation, issued the following: “This is to inform that FRRO has issued ‘Exit Permit’ to Mr.Serge Andre Marie Maini who was residing at Auroshilpam, Auroville. Hence, his name be removed from ROR and access to Aurovet, Auroville emails etc to be revoked with immediate effect. This is issued with the approval of the Competent Authority.” The RA WC responded 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. The RA has not come to any decision to remove any Aurovilian, including Satprem and Maël, from the RoR, nor has the RA delegated this power to any other body or individual.” Subsequently, the RA WC launched a Residents Assembly Decision process on the topic of unauthorized removal of residents from the Register of Residents (RoR). 741 people voted, of which 725 voted in favour of a resolution dedaring the announcements of removal as invalid and against the approved regulations and principles. On 23rd October, Satprem received the following from the authorities. “You were directed to take an exit from India on or before 01.07.2023 due to cancellation of your X-2 visa. It is learnt that you are still in India. You are here by directed again to take an early exit and comply to the instructions as soon as possible. Non-compliance of the above instructions, shall lead to initiation of suitable action.” Satprem left at the end of October, after a moving farewell from residents given at the Earth Institute.

Earth Institute update

Satprem set up and is deeply involved with the Auroville Earth Institute (AVEI), which has become one of the world’s foremost centres for excellence in earthen architecture, and a leader in the research, development, promotion and transfer of earth-based building technologies. AVEI has worked in 39 countries to promote and disseminate knowledge in earth architecture, and has garnered 15 awards for its work (4 international awards and 11 national awards). Recently their bank account at the State Bank of India was frozen at the request of a member of the FO FAMC. This means, says AVEI, that they cannot any longer pay their workers and very soon will be unable to function.

ROR final call

On 18th October, K.Swarnambika, Deputy Secretary / DIR, issued a final call to those Aurovilians who had not updated their entry in the ROR, warning them that if they did not

come to the office within ten days to do so, “any application after that shall not be entertained”. A list published by the FO WC on 19th October showed that 125 people had still not updated their details.

Farm issues

In July 2023, an email was received by Ayarpadi farm demanding that they hand over “the land parcel that you are farming in situated next to Windarra, as well as the service farm” so that the land could be reallocated to “Aurovilians [sic] who have undergone 6 months of training at Unity Farm”. The Farm Group responded with a letter which stated that they were taken aback by the request, going on to say: “We wonder why you want to take a part of a good functioning farm to experiment with. Ayarpadi has been consistently producing field crops on this part of their farm. The farm produces many grains that are in short supply in Auroville such as paddy, peanuts, ragi and sesame, as well as being the main supplier of boiled rice to Solar Kitchen.” Ayarpadi Farm has now received an email from the AVFO ‘Farm Service’, which stated that they would no longer be considering Ayarpadi Farm land for reallocation. The Auroville Farm Group reports that when farmers’ maintenances were cut with no notice many farms and farmers found themselves in considerable difficulty. Individual farmers found their lifestyles were affected and several were unable to go on paying back loans both personal and on the farm. Several farmers are now surviving on savings and/or making money for living expenses by doing non farming activities. Some are thinking about growing more cash crops to bring in more money or growing more profitable crops rather than just increasing production, and some have had to delay planned investment indefinitely until they are able to restructure the farm finances. Initial financial support was found for those farms and farmers in acute difficulty but a more long term solution for farm support is being sought. There have been wide ranging discussions about how to do this.

RA TDC reports on tree-cutting

The RA TDC is continuing to document and report on instances of tree cutting across Auroville. Their report of 7th September 2023 shows that at least 378 trees have been cut on the proposed Crown and Outer Ring Road trajectories since the NGT judgment of April 2022. On 3rd September 2023, banyans and palmyras that were beside the Crown road opposite Santé were cut. It is pointed out that “a narrowing or diversion of the road by a few centimetres would have allowed the trees to remain”.

David Nagel scholarship

AVI USA has created a special scholarship fund in collaboration with Auroville’s Botanical Gardens and with sponsorship from HiDesign. The scholarship is created in the memory of David Nagel, originally from Brooklyn, who joined Auroville in 1978. David dedicated his life to Auroville’s forests and planted many thousands of trees. The Nagel family wants to support Auroville youth in their pursuit of their work in a chosen field of forestry or ecology at Auroville’s Botanical Gardens.

Botanical Gardens networking workshop

In the middle of October a 3-day Botanical Gardens of India Networking Workshop was held at the Auroville Botanical Gardens. This event was supported by Botanical Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) with most of their partnered botanical gardens attending the workshop, and over 30 participants from 19 organisations across India attended. Over the 3 days, they shared the conservation work being done in each region and explored their expertise skill sets and areas where they could help each other grow. The aspiration is that this network will continue to grow and become a web of passionate partners from all over India.

Request to all electric cycle users

The Auroville vehicles Service, on the request of many Aurovilians, asks all electric cycle users to pedal while using the cycle paths instead of using the motor. This would reduce their speed and make it safer for others who use the cycle paths. The Vehide Service also suggests, in the interests of sustainable mobility, that for distances of 0 - 1 km, people should try to walk: 01 - 10 kms, try to pedal a cycle: 10 kms and above, try to use public transport.

New Whatsapp channel for Auroville

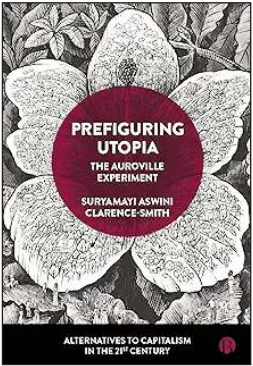
An Auroville Community Updates Whatsapp channel has been launched which is open to all members of the Auroville community (including residents, Newcomers and volunteers). It will contain the latest issues of the News & Notes - Community Edition, as well as Mass Bulletins, Announcements from RA Working Groups and announcements pertaining to community meetings, etc.

CHATGPT/ LLM/ generative AI user group

Residents are invited to join a new ChatGPT group. As the invitation put it, “Perhaps you’re a student of Mother and Sri Aurobindo intrigued by the possibility that AI is an essential milestone on the road to the supramental being. Or possibly you believe the opposite, that the entire trans-human agenda is an Asuric roadblock seductively placed by the Lord of Nations. If so, (you are invited) to join our Generative AI User Group! We’ll meet regularly (in the real world) to discuss the latest trends and developments in generative AI, share ideas, and collaborate on projects.”

New book release

A new book, “Prefiguring Utopia: The Auroville Experiment”, by Aurovilian Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith and published by Bristol University Press has just been released. A more affordable paperback version will come out in one year. The book can be ordered at amazon.in and a copy will be made available in the Auroville library.




Peace Tree planting

On 18th of August, a small group who had been present at the planting of a Peace Tree in Campinas, Brazil on 25th June 2004, gathered at the Botanical Gardens to plant another Peace Tree in Auroville. The Peace Trees programme was the brainchild of Danaan Parry of the Earthstewards Network, who wanted to promote friendly relations between peoples in colnifict through the planting of trees together. The first Peace Trees programme took place in Auroville in 1988 and involved teenagers from the U.S., Russia and India. Since then Peace Trees projects have happened in many other parts of the world.

Neem Tree and dropsy

An interesting headline appeared on Aurovet recently: “Neem Tree Eatery has joined Dropsy”. Dropsy is the old fashioned term for oedema, which is a build-up of fluid in the body. Possible causes include venous insufficiency, heart failure, kidney problems, low protein levels, liver problems, deep vein thrombosis, infections, angioedema, certain medications, and lymphedema. Not, one would have thought, the best way to advertise an Auroville eatery. However, it turns out that ‘Dropsy’ was a misspelling of ‘Dropzy”, an Auroville-developed app that allows food to be delivered to one’s doorstep by Integrated Transport (ITS) personnel.

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