

Overcoming apartheid – lessons for Auroville?

Jay Naidoo, former leader in the South African struggle against apartheid, and former minister responsible for Reconstruction and Development in the country's first democratic government, where he worked closely with Nelson Mandela, recently visited Auroville. On the 26th February 2023, he participated in an interaction with the community. He was accompanied by his wife, Lucie Pagé, journalist, director and writer, and Gogo Rutendo, a researcher exploring the interface between science, culture, cosmology and healing and with a deep understanding of African indigenous traditions. The insights they shared from their intimate experience of how the divisive apartheid system was overcome without major violence, and of the path breaking Truth and Reconciliation process, were felt by many to be pertinent to our present situation in Auroville. Here we present excerpts of the interaction.

Jay: The healing of all of us has to become the priority for the way forward. When I was four years old my family was evicted from our home because of the social engineering experiment of apartheid. It left a very deep impression upon me and a very deep wound that I carried for a long time. And its expression was anger because three million people were evicted from their homes, and millions of families and workers were broken when the migrant labour laws were brought in. It (the idea of being an inferior race) also became a wound in which we started to believe, and that is why Africa has suffered so terribly from colonisation.

But I was fortunate that I met somebody who is as important in our lives as Nelson Mandela: Steve Biko. When I was 15 I went to a meeting and this amazing charismatic student leader said something that I will remember as if it was yesterday. That the mind of the oppressed is the main weapon in the hands of the oppressor, that the colour of our skin does not make us inferior, and we can lose the chains that bind us by an exploration of our inner self.

He lit a spark which started me on a life journey, and also the millions who became known as the generation of 1976 who rose up to oppose apartheid. We thought we could defeat the system, but in our ego and ignorance we left behind our parents, our workers, and the rural people. That realisation changed my life trajectory. I became a volunteer in a union movement that was still illegal for African workers to join. Later I became the leader of one of the largest union

of workers on the African continent, one that became the backbone of our struggle for freedom.

Through that I understood what my role was, which was to create the conditions in which one day we could rise above our constituencies, tame our egos and understand that we have a possibility of a transition which was peaceful, in spite of our anger.

However, in 1989 we were approaching a situation like a racial civil war in our country. So Mandela's release presented us with a unique opportunity.

I was the first to arrive at his prison. It was an amazing experience to be greeted by someone who represented everything your life had been about. He walked out to this huge phalanx of the press and the first question was, "Do you have any feelings of revenge after you have been put in prison for 27 years?" His response was classic Mandela. "If I have revenge in my heart when I leave this prison, I will still be a prisoner."

Later, I sat in the cabinet with the same people who had had me on their death list and were responsible for the deaths of many people I knew, so I'm often asked the same question. And I answer in the same way.

I never wanted to go into government, but Mandela asked me to. There I learned that the search for power and the access to power do not resolve conflict in society, so when he left I left.

I was very fortunate. I thought I would die when I was 36, but then I met Lucie. She transformed me because up till then I was just a machine, with a total focus on

freedom. But through meeting her I understood that freedom is much more than the political freedom we fight for. She humanised me and brought me on a journey to understand who I am.

So here I am, continuing the search for who I am, where I am going, and what defines my humanity. And this is what attracted me when I first encountered the philosophy of Mother and Sri Aurobindo many years ago.

Heal yourself and forgive

Lucie: My greatest lesson in South Africa, and what changed my life, was Nelson Mandela's 85th birthday. In that crowd I saw his jailer, I saw the chief of the party that had kept him in prison for so long, and I saw one of the ministers responsible for killing his comrades. When I saw how he treated those people, it changed my life. There was a card on the tables with his favourite proverb. The proverb said, 'eat your breakfast alone', because it's important to have some time in the day when you can consider who you are and what you are doing; 'share your lunch with your friends', because this reflects solidarity; but 'give your supper to your enemies', because you have to live with them, and you have to accept that no one has exactly the same ideas as you, but we live on a shared land.

That proverb gave me the courage to heal myself and to forgive those who had oppressed me. I understood that with whoever is in front of you there is always a bridge to build, there is always something that unites us. We live in a world where we look at the differences, but if we look at what is the same, then we can start building the road.

Forgiveness for me has been the greatest liberator. Forgiving is not accepting what the other person did. Forgiveness is cutting the energetic link with the event or the person so that you can continue with your life. Mandela said that when you want the other one to die, you drink the poison.

Gogo Rutendo: When I hear about the great ones of South Africa, like Mandela and Biko, I realise that they are living quintessentially the principle of *ubuntu*. At the very core *ubuntu* says "I am because you are". And that means that there is no other. There is no discrimination, no separation, no segregation.

But the human aspect accounts for only about a quarter of what *ubuntu* represents, for the suffix *untu* refers to the dynamic life force, the causeless cause, the origin that weaves through all creation. *Untu* manifests in the grass, the flowers and in trees, in time and space, and in modal forces like beauty, fear, anger and love. So *ubuntu* is the quantum principle that holds all conflict resolution.



Jay Naidoo

In conflict resolution, we use the principle we call 'circumspection', which is how we view things according to indigenous African cosmology. So, firstly, we have segregation, which is represented by a deity who is always looking for the external differences. Then we have a female deity who is always looking to see what the similarities are, but doesn't take into consideration what may be inner differences. Another deity is the warrior and he engages in analysis, which from an African perspective is the ability to see the inner differences. And then we have another female deity who engages in synthesis – the ability to see the inner similarities in spite of outer differences.

Circumspection engages all of these: it is the ability to see from all angles. So in conflict resolution we are always seeking to have a circumspective view of any situation, including a circumspect view of our inner selves.

Mandela's release

Aurovilian: It seems that Mandela's release from prison was a turning point. How did that come about?

Jay: There was this global explosion in the 1960s which manifested in massive anti-war protests and the great liberation heroes. Steve Biko translated that into what became the Black Consciousness movement. It was a watershed of the modern South African struggle, for it created a new cadreship of leaders who built from the grassroots. We were a generation prepared to die for freedom, so we created a very powerful mass democratic movement. Organising is actually the art and science of coalition building, and we constructed this huge 'tent' in which there were communists, capitalists, trade unionists and nationalists: everyone who felt they could contribute something to what we were fighting for, which was 'one person, one vote'.

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From left: Gogo Rutendo, Jay Naidoo, Lucie Pagé

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We didn’t defeat the apartheid regime, we didn’t march to Pretoria on the backs of tanks. Rather, we achieved a political stalemate where they could not defeat us and we could not defeat them.

Also, when the Berlin Wall fell, it meant the West no longer had to support a white apartheid regime as a bulwark against communism, and this created the opportunity for Nelson Mandela to be released.

Lucie: Also, because of the international sanctions, South Africa was bankrupt by the end of the 1980s. Somebody had to put a key in the door of Mandela’s cell and open it. That man was De Klerk. But at the back of his mind he thought he could impose a veto on behalf of the white people on the principle of one man, one vote. He failed because this was seen as just another form of apartheid, and that is why De Klerk left the government.

Jay: Meanwhile, the country was falling into deeper and deeper conflict, and at one point there was recognition on both sides that if we continued like this, we would have no country to govern. This meant that each one of us had to rise above our constituencies.

We needed leaders we could trust, so we gravitated towards those, like Mandela, who were a spectacular example of servant leadership, who through great personal sacrifice had built the foundation of what we did.

Leadership is not about always swimming with the current. It is when you have the courage to swim against it, guided by an inner wisdom. For example, when Mandela was released, violence enveloped the country. This was due to the resistance of a very powerful element of right-wing groups and their allies who felt Mandela’s release was a complete sell-out. But at a certain point, Mandela announced at a huge meeting in Durban, where the violence was worst, that we must unilaterally suspend the armed struggle, and “throw all our arms into the sea”. There was fierce resistance to this, even from within our own leadership, because this was an important aspect of our struggle, and this was at a time when people in the townships were being killed.

Even I was a bit skeptical. But his argument was solid, for if we had continued on that line, we would have had even more casualties and the country would have fallen apart.

The way to reconciliation

Aurovilian: How did you get people responsible for atrocities to participate in the Truth and Reconciliation process?

Jay: It came to a point where we had to make a decision about all the atrocities that happened in our past. We looked at all the literature and experience of the world, including the Nuremberg Trials. These were a way of punishing people accused of atrocities so that never again would that trauma be repeated.

But we didn’t take that route. For, like Sri Aurobindo, the revolutionary Mandela had been transformed by the time he spent in a prison cell. During that time, he studied the language of the oppressor, he read the Upanishads, he had understood so much about life, and now he knew who he was and how he wanted to live his life.

When he was released, many people wanted revenge, but he advocated a process of reconciliation. We chose the route we call ‘amnesty’. If you came forward and presented yourself before a panel, led by Archbishop Tutu, and said this is what you did, and there was a political reason why you did it, and you were following instructions, then you were granted amnesty for the crime that was committed. Some people felt this just meant you were going to give in to the other side. But for Mandela it meant more than giving in or just forgiving. It took great courage because it involved apology, meaning an acknowledgement that people saw, understood, those whom they had been oppressing or mistreating. It was about making reparation. Mandela taught us to release anger in a way that allowed a path to reconciliation.

This was a process we felt would allow us to go forward because the country at that moment was extremely fragile. There were two opposing paths. The white minority wanted a veto right on any democracy, while our principle was one person, one vote, in a nonracial South Africa. So the question was how to find common ground, because it is very easy to find differences. But if you descend from the mind to the heart and open up your heart, what you ultimately find is unity of purpose and our common humanity, and this can become the foundation for transcending our differences.

Therefore the Commission, while imperfect, was the basis for powerful reconciliation between white and black. And this was celebrated in the 1994 election, when we all stood in line – white, Indian and black, fighter and oppressor – and we all started to talk to each other. That was the victory of taking that route.



Gogo Rutendo and Lucie Pagé

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The inner reason for conflict

Aurovilian: This happened when apartheid was no longer an option. But what is happening in Auroville today is a small group of people feel that oppression is an option and the way to get things done. This is what we are struggling with.

Jay: This is your challenge. I have always been part of community building, nation building. If I look at my own country today and see how far we have fallen from the great ideals that Mandela represented, I ask myself, how can we have such leaders? And I have come to the conclusion that it’s because we deserve them. So what function do they play? I turn again to The Mother’s wisdom who said that everything, even the asuras, are part of a divine creation and they are here to test our sincerity.

Mandela’s intention was to crystallise a new consciousness in the country. We haven’t really succeeded in that, but it doesn’t mean we failed. It means our sincerity is being tested.

So I see that all you are going through now is for a reason, which is to advance yourselves in your consciousness, in spite of how much pain it causes. If you can separate yourselves from the pain, the trauma, and learn the lesson and rise above it, like we did in South Africa, there’s always something better that you will evolve to than where you are at the moment.

But are we looking for another Messiah to come to the rescue? Another Mother, another Mandela?

Our son gave me the answer at Mandela’s funeral. He said there has been a genocide of human values, which is why we face what we face. But don’t look for another Mandela, he said, he won’t come. Rather make the Mandela inside you come out, for we all have Mandela qualities. We all have Mother qualities.

My most painful experiences have been my greatest teachers. And I’ve learnt that whatever I dislike in another is my own ego, my feeling of aggrievement, my feeling of anger, and that I have to find a way to put myself in the shoes of that person.

I experienced this in Mandela’s cabinet. One of the ministers was a man whose organisation had killed people I had trained, and I ended up sitting next to him. Then I thought, who am I to judge? If Mandela had appointed him and he had been respectful enough to accept Mandela as President, even though this man had the potential to destabilise the whole country, who was I to judge? Therefore, I learned that my role was to

follow the lead of Mandela and to find a way to work with that person. Because then the larger question is, whose truth is in the room? Is there only one truth? Do we believe we carry the absolute truth?

So we need to find a way not to build bridges but to become the bridge. Now I have to see what I have to unlearn, what I have to change in my behaviour, so that I am able to be the bridge between the rising tensions in my own country.

Lucie: One exercise I do is to send pure love to somebody who has oppressed me, because obviously that is what is missing in their life. Everything is about energy. If you express anger towards that person, they will use that energy to direct it back towards you. So if, instead, you give them love, that is what eventually will come back. That’s the only way out.

Jay: That’s exactly what I learned; it is how I liberated myself from deep anger. Now I’m at peace with myself and everything around me. I only want to open my heart to the divine love, for it is a tool to conquer everything. It’s not easy to practice, but Auroville is too precious to waste this experiment: it’s too precious for the world. For in the world today we are at the edge of a precipice.

I wrote a book about my message to the next generation. It had to be one without anger, and one in which I admit my complicity in what I’ve been responsible for, because all conflict is cause and effect. Nation building, community building, is about finding the unifying web, the mycelium to build an organism that is constantly replicating itself through its consciousness. And then it will become a community of divine practice rather than a community of interests, because that is what always leads to these clashes.

The courage of servant leadership

Aurovilian: You said that at a certain point in South Africa there was a stalemate when both sides understood there was no way forward except to reconcile. What if, as in Auroville’s present situation, that realisation is not there yet? How do we accelerate the process to get to that point?

Jay: I think you have a unique opportunity here to take the debate to a higher level than is happening in the rest of the world.

The question you have to ask yourself is, are you waiting for an invitation or are you extending an invitation? If you are waiting because you feel hurt, you are not acknowledging that there may be hurt on the other side. Isn’t it easier just to swallow the ego a bit, to tame it and say, okay, if there is an opportunity to sit around a table, can I go into that conversation with my heart and not my head? And open myself up to Divine Grace, to surrender to Divine Love?

The real courage of ‘servant leadership’, which is what Mandela embodied, is to stand up and say, ‘I invite you to a conversation where there are no conditions, where I want to express myself and I want you to express yourself. And I want us to think about what I am prepared to do to make peace with you, and then you tell me what you are willing to do to make peace with me. I acknowledge there are differences, but I also acknowledge that we all say we are inspired by Sri Aurobindo and The Mother’.

I think self-growth is the most important thing which The Mother talked about. If you feel that something is not working, what are you going to do to fix it without the expectation that somebody is going to come and prostrate themselves before you first? We didn’t expect De Klerk to apologise to Mandela; that wasn’t the issue for us. The issue was, can I negotiate with you so that we can get to a shared vision? It took a long, long time, with many people dying, before that happened.

You don’t face those situations here, so just get on with what you need to do now. When there’s a problem, solve it by opening your hearts.

Indigenous conflict resolution

Jay: In the indigenous tradition we work with shamans of the Sand People. They are

hunter gatherers and when they have a conflict, even a serious crime like a murder, everybody in the community, including the children, come to sit under the tree in the desert and all have a say. They don’t have jails or policeman or courts. The intention is to solve it, and when there is a penance to be paid, the entire community, including the perpetrator and the victim’s families, has to agree to it. In this way, they retain the integrity of the community.

Gogo: Many spiritual leaders contributed their wisdom to making a peaceful transition in South Africa. Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa [a traditional Zulu healer from South Africa who passed away in 2020, eds.] talked about what happens when, for example, a serial killer is brought into the court of a certain community. They would take the serial killer into the birthing hut and allow him to sit in the hut, away from the pregnant woman, for the duration of her labour, ensuring that he hears every scream. And once the baby is born, the first person who catches the baby is the serial killer because they want him to experience what life smells like, feels like. Their understanding is that he is killing because he has lost the principle of life. So if we bring life to him in its purest form, he will be reformed.

This is healing as opposed to punishing. It is seeing the root of the problem, and therefore getting to the root of the solution.

Vusamazulu suffered many atrocities, both at the hands of the apartheid regime as well as the revolutionaries. But his main message was that the future can be changed because the future lies in each one of us. And it all ripples down to “I am because you, we, are”.

The African Pavilion

Jay: We were very disheartened that the African pavilion in Auroville’s International Zone has disintegrated, and why more Africans are not part of this international experiment. It is not about blaming, but you have to ask yourself in your hearts, what are you doing that doesn’t make us feel welcome? Is it because you believe that because we come from Africa that we don’t have spirituality? That is a very racial construct.

Gogo: Colonialism did an atrocious trick upon Africa and made it believe it was the ‘Dark Continent’. But it is in Africa that we first see civilisation growing. Here we see the first evidence of human interaction, the oldest lunar calendar, and the oldest solar calendar, which predates Stonehenge by 70,000 years. All of this knowledge and much more have been hidden, and part of what we are doing is explicating it and showing how we all are one, ubuntu, which is bringing everything back to that knowledge of the first time.

Stay focused on the vision

Jay: I think this is the kind of wisdom we need to call on at this moment when we are facing so many momentous challenges in the world. We need to keep focused on the vision, the lodestar, that will take us to the next step in our evolution. If we don’t do that in this generation, our species will not survive. I’m not worried about Mother Earth, although it will take a hundred million years for it to recover from our stupidity. The question is, have we earned the right to be here?

In my day, the big question was, are you ready to die for freedom? Today, in my dialogue with young people, I ask them, what are you prepared to live for?

The Mother never intended that the unique experiment of Auroville stops here. She wanted it to become a self-replicating mycelium which would infect the whole world. So we would like you to share it with us, we would like to send people grounded in our cosmology to learn from you, but also to complete you. For when you are completed you will have the wisdom of many traditions, many lineages, and maybe the problems that you face today will have many other solutions.

We want a genuine, authentic collaboration and intelligent dialogue with you. In helping consolidate you, we would be giving you the protection of everything we come from. And we would be taking Mother’s vision to its logical conclusion, which is helping humanity at a very precarious moment.

Alan

Reflections on the Governing Board

Claude Arpi is a French-born Aurovilian living in Auroville for the past 49 years. He is well-known as a historian and tibetologist. He is the author of several books on Tibet and on Indo-French relations, and was instrumental in the creation of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture in Auroville. Here he reflects, among other things, on the role and functioning of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation.

AVToday: How would you assess the present Governing Board?

Claude: It is difficult to say. Judging from the minutes of its first meeting held in November 2021, [see *AVToday* # 390, January 2022] the Board members hold strong views about how Auroville should develop, which in itself is a good thing. At the same time, we know that many, if not all, Board members have negative views of the Aurovilians. The narrative in government circles in New Delhi is that Auroville is not developing as it should, that accounts are cooked, and that there is a lot of fighting going on between various Auroville factions. This narrative is mostly false.

Could you explain?

It really upsets me that Board members say that ‘Aurovilians have done nothing’ in the past 55 years. They ignore that in 1968 Auroville was a desert which has been greened by the Aurovilians; that the Aurovilians themselves built the Matrimandir; and that all the land has been bought with private funds, and nearly all the houses, all the commercial buildings and most of the service-oriented buildings have been built with private donations. What has the government contributed in all these years? The answer is ‘not much’. The Government has helped manifest some infrastructure, such as part of the former Crown Road, which recently was dug up to make place for the new Crown Road, helped create several school buildings and CRIPA, and funded two apartment buildings. But other public buildings, such as Pitanga, a major part of Future School, the Town Hall and the Multi Media centre have been funded privately or received funding from national or international organizations. In short, all the people I know have worked hard, very hard, for Auroville and it pains me that this is not acknowledged – rather, they are demeaned.

Then ‘cooking the books’. I believe that the Governing Board is mistaken in its views that huge mistakes have been made. In the last one and a half years, the Board has initiated forensic audits of the accounts of many commercial units, even re-auditing accounts that had already been audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. But nothing substantial has been found and, as far as I know, no commercial unit has been accused of any serious wrongdoing, and certainly not of ‘cooking the books’. If a unit was found to be fraudulent, doubtless the Board would have initiated action and informed the community. The International Advisory Council, too, asked for proof of any such misdoings, but it was never given.

Lastly the in-fighting. It is true that Aurovilians often disagree on things, and that this has hampered Auroville’s development. But this is not unique to Auroville residents. Even the members of the Auroville International Advisory Council report that they cannot agree on many issues. I would say that it is regrettable that the Secretary, who announced when she joined Auroville that she was good at harmonizing people, hasn’t been able to do so and instead has expressed her own preference by not taking into account a truly collective effort like the Dreamweaving process.

How do you evaluate the functioning of the Board?

There are a number of problems. Firstly there is the question to what extent the Board members understand the spiritual background of Auroville. Many present members may have read some of the works of Sri Aurobindo, but have they read *Mother’s Agenda* and have they read all that The Mother said about Auroville? Have they understood the importance of the Supramental descent in 1956 and of the concept of the surhomme [‘overman’, the intermediary being between the human being and the supramental being, eds.] and its consequences for Auroville? Have they realized what The Mother meant when she announced the birth of a new world, in which Auroville has a specific role to play? “Auroville wants to be a new creation expressing a new consciousness in a new way and according to new methods,” She said in August, 1969.

I have my doubts that this has been understood. The present administration consists of people who seem to think as technocrats. In that thinking, there is a hierarchy where they give orders which are to be obeyed. This explains the stand of the Board that they are Auroville’s supreme authority. The appeal the Board filed in the Madras High Court against the judgement of Justice Abdul Quddhose [see *AVToday* #398, September 2022] shows this view. The Board disagrees that the three authorities mentioned in the Auroville Foundation Act, namely the Governing Board, the International Advisory Council, and the Residents’ Assembly, jointly manage the Foundation. The Governing Board argues that it alone has the power, the superintendence and the management of the Foundation, and that Auroville cannot be administered by the people of Auroville. We have yet to see if the appeal bench of the High Court shares this view. But in my opinion, it goes against what The Mother

wanted for Auroville.

Secondly: it is a problem that the members of the Board do not stay in Auroville and are not approachable. Usually they receive information only from one source, e.g. the Office of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. During the chairmanship of Dr. Karan Singh, Dr. Kireet Joshi and Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, the Board members would stay 3-4 days in Auroville and individual Aurovilians could approach them directly, and there would always be a joint dinner at the end to which many Aurovilians would be invited. That personal interaction is not happening at present. Moreover, the community is not informed when and where a Board meeting is scheduled to happen; many Board meetings are held outside Auroville or on Zoom; and the minutes are published months afterwards, such as the minutes of its July and November 2022 meetings which were only published in March 2023. So we can’t interact directly with them, tell them about our work, our problems, our concerns, our aspirations; neither do they have an opportunity to share their observations directly with the residents. Most of the Aurovilians are very much aware of their own limitations, and would always welcome constructive criticism, which is very different from defamation.

How do you see the role of the Governing Board and the Government of India?

Let’s make it abundantly clear that the Auroville Foundation is an independent statutory organisation, and not a part of the Indian Government.

Regarding the Government’s role: We can only be grateful to the successive Indian governments for their unmitigated support of Auroville, starting with Prime Minister Ms. Indira Gandhi who gave her full support in the 1970s and early 1980s,



Claude Arpi

consolidate the city and greenbelt areas, helping to build accommodation for those who want to join Auroville, but do not have the funds to contribute to a house or apartment, and giving a protection for visas to the foreign-born Aurovilians who have chosen to live here. I am not arguing that the Government should not take action against foreigners who do mischief. Those should be dealt with according to the law. But those who have worked in Auroville for the best part of their lives and donated their savings to Auroville should be guaranteed the right to stay. Many, if they were told to leave India, would have nowhere to go and have no funds to sustain themselves.

And the role of the Governing Board?

To give the freedom to the residents of Auroville to grow and develop, including the freedom of making mistakes. And, of course, to support the full functioning of Auroville’s Residents’ Assembly and the working groups chosen by it, such as the Working Committee, the Town Development Council, the Entry Board, the Auroville Council and the Funds and Assets Management Committee with its subgroups the Budget Coordination Committee and the Housing Board. This is my view. We have shown between 1988 and 2021 that we could harmoniously work with the Governing Board and the Government.

The Secretary has spoken about bringing 1,000 volunteers to Auroville. What is your view on this?

The first obvious question is of course, why? In principle, we welcome whoever wants to join, but we never advertised for people to come and join Auroville. The growth is organic. Has this idea come up because the Board is not satisfied with the cooperation of the Aurovilians or because they want a spurt in the population growth? Then, where are these volunteers going to be housed, and what are they going to do? Are they going to take over jobs from Aurovilians? Most importantly, what is the motivation and what is the quality of aspiration for these people to come to Auroville?

I remember when Prime Minister Modi visited Auroville in 2018, a group of people was to present different aspects of Auroville. Like the others, I was allotted a subject, but when Mr. Modi arrived in front of me, I suddenly changed my topic and quoted a discussion with Mother in the *Agenda* of 4th April 1972, when Mother says: “Coming to Auroville does not mean coming to an easy life – it means coming to a gigantic effort for progress”. I also explained that Aurovilians do not own any immoveable assets; even assets created with personal funds belong to Auroville. “Auroville is not for everybody,” I concluded. I don’t regret having changed my script.

Those who complain about the slow population growth of Auroville should realize that, to join Auroville, you have to find or build accommodation, e.g. a house or an apartment. But as all immoveable assets are owned by the Auroville Foundation – there aren’t many possibilities to rent – people have to make a non-refundable donation to the Auroville Foundation to the value of the house or apartment, in order to become its steward. Nowadays, we are talking about

amounts between 30-60 lakh rupees [US \$ 35,000 – \$ 70,000]. Losing the right to stay in Auroville (or, in the case of foreigners, losing the right to stay in India) means losing one’s donation, and that is not an attractive proposition.

What are your thoughts about the future?

I hope that the appeal judgement will clarify how Auroville is to be managed. Whatever the outcome, we must find solutions for solving the disharmonious situations that have arisen. Some people say that we have to pursue mediation or what was done in that South Africa, truth and reconciliation.

Another issue is that Auroville must find new ways of functioning and introduce more freedom and less control. A former Secretary, Mr. Bala Baskar, once said that Auroville had added its own bureaucracy on top of the horrendous Indian bureaucracy. That has to change.

In the larger perspective, I rely on what Mother said when she started Auroville: “The city will be built by what is invisible to you. The men who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger Forces. Nothing depends on human beings – neither the planning, nor the execution – nothing! That is why one can laugh.” [September 1969] That is our only support in these difficult times.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets Claude Arpi, February 2018

the more so as she was dedicated to The Mother. It was her government that submitted the first resolutions on Auroville at UNESCO. I once visited her house in New Delhi, which is now a museum. A copy of a volume of *Mother’s Agenda* was on a table near her bed. That was very touching. Indira had a deep reverence for The Mother; the *Agenda* contains many instances of her contact with the Mother during the 1971 war in Bangladesh and earlier in 1962 during the invasion of India by China.

Subsequent governments continued that support, such as in the form of creating a special visa policy for Auroville and through the giving of yearly and special grants. Prime Minister Modi too has been very positive about Auroville, as we learned from his speech given in Auroville on the occasion of Auroville’s 50th anniversary [see *AVToday* #344, March 2018]. It was confirmed to me personally by French President Mr. Macron, who I met at a reception in Delhi in March 2018. He mentioned to me that he had met with Prime Minister Modi, who had spoken in very positive words about Auroville. A senior official of the French embassy in New Delhi later told me that Mr. Modi had spoken about Auroville even earlier, in April 2015, when he had gone to UNESCO in Paris, and offered flowers to Sri Aurobindo’s statue there.

The Government’s role, in my opinion, should be to protect and support Auroville – which means protecting the lands of Auroville against speculators, helping to acquire lands to

The Banyan: a brief history

In the mid 1960s Roger Anger wanted to know the location of the geographical centre of the city to be. He brought a map to Mother and she indicated a spot. Roger took a jeep and, after crossing an expanse of sandy desert, he found a lone tree at the place which Mother had indicated. The Banyan.

Aurovilians like to believe that Auroville ‘discovered’ this tree and gave it a special significance, but this is not true. *Ficus benghalensis* is one of the sacred trees of India, and this tree had been planted some 40 – 50 years before the inauguration of Auroville, by a villager from Kottakarai in a votive offering to the god Murugan for a prayer answered. By 1968 it was already quite a large tree (as can be seen in the photo), and had served for many years as a place for travellers from Kaliveli on their way to Pondicherry to rest and drink water. To this day it is known locally as the ‘water-shade tree’.

But it also had a certain significance beyond that. A locally-born Aurovilian recalls that when someone was sick, a family member would take a hair from the sick person, tie it around a nail and put a nail in the tree, which was believed to help in the healing. “I still remember the tree full of nails!”

He also remembers that the tree had a more sinister significance. “The villagers believed that a spirit lived in the tree. They would never sit under it or go near it at noon or at midnight. And they would always go in groups of three or four because they believed the spirit would kill anyone who was alone.”

It is also not true that Aurovilians were the first to care for the tree. An old lady – Andhayee ‘Ammal’ – built a small hut by the tree, and she became its first protector, warding off goats and preventing people cutting the branches for firewood. She also began to provide water to thirsty travellers, which is why the tree also came to be called *tannipandalamaram*, ‘the tree where water is given’.

The locals believed she had special powers, and asked her to perform pujas under the tree to call for rain and to bless their crops. The story goes



The Banyan tree in 1968

that when Aurovilians first came to survey the site for the future Matrimandir, she said, ‘So you have finally come to build the temple’. Apparently, she had been waiting for some time.

In 1975, in suspicious circumstances, Ammal’s hut was destroyed in a fire while she was in Pondicherry. She was very upset. She didn’t try to rebuild there but went to live on a plot of land closer to Kottakarai village, where she died at around the age of 90 years.

The tree, it seems, also had a special relationship with Mother. One evening, Mother reported that the spirit of the tree had visited her in distress. She immediately instructed a *sadhak* to go and check on it. He discovered that somebody had carelessly stuck a nail, knife or axe (the versions

vary) in the trunk and immediately removed it.

However, if ‘Ammal’ was the first protector of the Banyan, it is true that it received professional care once the Aurovilians arrived. For Narad, the Banyan was one of the two most sacred trees in the world (the other was the Service Tree at the Samadhi). Narad and his helpers treated the rot and decay in some of the limbs, and allowed, for the first time, some of the aerial roots to take root in the earth (before that they had been nibbled by goats or broken by young cowherds swinging on them). He also stopped the practice of watering grass under the tree as this was weakening the Banyan.

Later, with the help of a professional tree surgeon who had joined Auroville, he would carefully prune

diseased limbs, or those which would affect the stability of the tree, along with unnecessary aerial roots. He adopted the rule he had for the Service Tree in the Ashram: no power machinery was to be used on the tree. He was always careful to maintain the aesthetic balance between the size and shape of the tree and the neighbouring Matrimandir.

Over the years, the tree has been threatened not only by rot and fungus—which have been treated with potassium, magnesium and Bach flower remedies, among other remedies – but also by cyclones. In the most recent one, much of the crown was destroyed. However, it has always recovered, and become once again a favourite haunt of birds, monkeys and owls.

And of people. In India, people

have traditionally meditated or held meetings under banyans (‘banian’ derives from *banias*, merchants who sat in the shade of the tree conducting business), and our Banyan is no exception. One of the most important meetings in Auroville’s early history, at a time when there was tension between and with office holders of the Sri Aurobindo Society, happened under the Banyan. Since then, Aurovilians have often come together here in silent meditation at times of communal stress or to remember the passing of a loved one.

Regarding the Matrimandir gardens, Mother once told Narad, “I would like you to begin with the Garden of Unity”. As the Garden of Unity was intended to surround the Banyan, the Banyan is, indeed, our tree of unity.

Alan

Being one with the tree

“Ooh ooh!” Himal mimics the owls who make their nests in cavities high in the upper branches of the Banyan tree. “There’s quite a few of them. They come out in the evening. You can hear them.” He imitates their ‘ooh ooh ooh’ call again. “They are beautiful birds. Not very big. Big eyes. Sharp noses. In the evening you can see them fly in and out. Maybe the owls are the spirit of the tree, who knows?” He laughs lightly.

Himal Jaiswal came to Auroville 45 years ago as a seven year old boy. Approximately two years ago he started working in the Matrimandir gardens. At the time, the Banyan tree was badly infected with white fungus. “In the beginning when I came to work, I was asked if I was interested to help heal the tree, and I said, yes. The tree had reached a stage where branches might have collapsed, so we had to do something.

Himal felt such a responsibility towards the tree. “The Banyan is like the spirit of Auroville, and it was not happy. At least the middle trunk was not happy, along with some big branches going out of it.” But after regular applications of neem, turmeric, jaggery, and probiotic powder, the tree regained its health.

Not just anyone could have done the job. With a small step ladder, and a sprayer filled with a neem oil solution, Himal wriggles through the small opening as if in a reverse birth. “Me being small makes it just possible that I can crawl in. It is not easy. There are sharp things inside the tree. You have to take care. There is just enough space that I can kind of turn around



Himal

in there. That’s about it.”

Himal describes being inside the tree as ‘magical’. “It’s like being in a cave, except it’s much warmer. You can see through the cracks in the tree trunk.” He says people come to pray at the tree and he sometimes finds little mementos that people leave inside, like a picture of someone’s beloved.

“The tree was here at the beginning of Auroville. As children, we played under it, rode our horses under it. Gatherings took place; very

important decisions of Auroville were made under this tree,” Himal says, recalling the stories he’s been told and his own memories from when he was a child. “From what I know, local goatherds would come every day and feed their goats leaves from the lower branches. After Auroville started, Auroville pioneers took over care of the tree and gave it space, compost and love, and it grew bigger and bigger. It’s said that the Divine Mother in Pondicherry once told somebody to go to Auroville and look at the tree because there seemed to be a problem. The person came and

saw that there was a knife stuck in the tree. So she was able to perceive from there that something was wrong with the tree.”

Himal feels fortunate to be able to protect the tree. “Though it’s difficult, we must do it. The tree is like the mother of Auroville. Being inside the tree is like being inside the womb of a mother. It is a very soothing, calm feeling.”

He wonders aloud, “Maybe the Divine Mother chose me to take care of the tree.”

Maybe she did. Maybe she also chose the tree.

Amālya B., Piotr, and Gita



Himal enters the Banyan

Roots from the Sky

A 'performance' and exhibition at Centre d'Art Citadines from 18 – 25 March 2023, coordinated by Cedric Bregnard

Centre d'Art, Monday, three o'clock in the afternoon. About fifteen people are working on the photograph of the Auroville banyan tree which is spread out over seven metres in front of the large picture window. Some are sitting on the floor, some standing, others have climbed on chairs.

The Roots from the Sky performance started only in the morning and the result is already striking. On the huge image of the Banyan tree, printed in very light shades of grey, the participants redraw the volumes, from black to light, making the tree reappear barely perceptibly.

The artist who created the performance, Cedric Bregnard, provided them with precious calligraphy brushes that allow them to vary the line to interpret the thickest shadows of the trunks, as well as the finest details, such as the veins of the leaves.

To create the monumental composition, Cedric took numerous shots of this tree, as vast as a forest, in the early morning when the light was still hazy. He juxtaposed these shots to recreate a seven metres image of the tree and it is this that serves as a support for the performance. He then enlarged elements, such as some of the trunks, and hung them in the Citadines gallery, bringing them down from the ceiling like the pillars of a temple.

Several schools will take these photographs to make their own performances in their own facilities with their students. Once completed, they will be brought to the gallery for the opening of the exhibition.

As the days go by, the participants little by little connect the trunks, the branches and the roots. Together, each with his or her own stroke, impetuous or restrained, strong or light, they work to give the great banyan a new dimension. Some stay a few minutes, others forget the hours, but for all the experience is pure happiness. They admit to entering a kind of trance, spellbound by the movement of the hand.

It is a choral experience in which Cedric intervenes in the background, sometimes giving advice or encouragement. He has given birth to forty-four similar performances, and yet for him the emotion is always new. He still remembers the first one, during which a total art form was spontaneously born. Dancers, poets, musicians had also contributed.

At Centre d'Art, the magic has already worked. Several musicians came to improvise small concerts, and the sounds of their instruments seemed like the breath of the tree itself.

It is a new form of art, intrinsically linked to life, that Cedric Bregnard brings to Auroville today. An art that has definitely left the studio, that addresses each of us to put us back in touch with our creative potential. A regenerative and curative art, since through the form of the tree it is our humanity that is recomposed.

Dominique Jacques



Cedric Bregnard on the Roots from the Sky collaboration

Auroville Today: Superficially, it's just a matter of making a beautiful photo and then asking people to copy it.

Cedric: Simply copying would be sterile. A machine can do that. But when you add the sense of observation, seeing where the light is and where is the shadow, and how the revealing of one depends upon the other, you enter into a process. Through the simple action of bringing back the shadow with the light or vice versa you start to interact intimately with the leaves, the bark, of the Banyan.

And you do that not alone but with all the others – more than 450 in this case – who have been working on it over six days. The goal is the same for everyone, to contribute to the completion of the image, but no two people will do it in the same way. So you start to experience the diversity, and not only the diversity but also the beauty of diversity: that is possible to be so different and yet to be in unity.

Through this process, people who had known the Banyan for 30 years or more experienced it in a new way. As an artist, it's interesting for me to see this happening in Auroville with people who



Cedric Bregnard

have such an intimate relationship with the tree. It's like an affirmation of what I'm doing.

Do you provide guidance?

Not at the beginning, but in the final days I give more and more guidance when there are still places which are untraced, because it is necessary to decide what needs to be filled in, and

what can stay untraced. We deliberately keep some spaces free to keep the silent quality. What is most important for the process is that the tree finds its harmony.

At this moment, I explain to the participants that it's not a personal choice which part of the tree they work on. It's a collective choice to achieve that harmony, because if people get too involved in one section they are not participating in the larger process.

In that sense it is much more than an art project...

Yes.

Will this work be displayed permanently in Auroville?

The original piece will be sold as a donation for Art for Land. But we will make reproductions on fabric which will stay in Auroville, perhaps at places like the Matrimandir. Individuals can also order a photo in a smaller size through the Centre d'Art of either the original photo, or the inked one which was the outcome of this collaboration.

From an interview by Alan

ODE TO THE BANYAN

The Tree

When I first saw the tree, I saw a Mother and her many children.

Branches reaching out to all directions. Outward, skyward, earthward. The tree had roots that were branches and branches that were rooted. Her spirit had sprung forth from the barren red earth, spreading her canopy as an offering to the heavenly bodies, outstretched long tortuous arms to the four winds. And from those arms, roots had reached down. Tentacular being, expanding, grounding, and expanding further more.

The tree was not always so majestic. Once upon a time, she had stood alone and exposed on a thirsty plateau.

A divine finger had then pointed at a geographical area on a map. And in an instant, the tree was no longer just a tree.

She had become the center of the new city of dawn.

Instilled with a sacred calling, nursed with the love and care of early Aurovilians, the spirit of the lone tree had unveiled and deployed her grace.

In the backdrop, a golden sun was emerging from the earth, while the tree extended her aerial roots, intricate tapestry of interconnectedness and support. In a caring embrace, she had stretched her shade to shelter the innocent games of the city's first children and lent her tranquillity to the conversations that would shape the future of this land.

Naturally, steadily, she had conquered the space around her, establishing her noble figure as the perennial witness to the rise of a new consciousness.

Time passed. The tree which had been one, was now many. A forest, a family unit. From her hollow core, echoing with invocations of men and women for a unifying Truth, ripples had formed, one life-supporting ring giving roots to another. She was now a temple, her lush dome resting upon vigorous pillars that had pierced through the ground to establish themselves as solemn guardians of her integrity. To fulfil her full-fleshed legacy, She had given command to her offshoots. Rooted, grounded extensions of herself, infused with her vital force, her sap, her blood, sustaining the vision at the core, carrying her legacy far and wide. The consequence, and condition, of her realisation.

There she stands.

Dignified guardian, at the heart of Humanity's vow for Truth, Peace and Unity.

A mother, and her many children.

And the Mother lives on,

To see her legacy reach far up,
Out,
and down,

Into the Red Earth
Over the Blue Sky,

And they are now many,

Many within the One.

Amālyā B.

All For WATER For All



Above and below: *Neer Koodam* ceremonies in Auroville



Marakkanam school children celebrate water awareness



Women's groups choreographed their own dances to songs about water



Boating, swimming, ziplining fun!



March 22 marked the closing of WaterFest'23, a multi-pronged and multi-partner initiative under the banner of 'All For WATER For All'. Auroville units and resident experts joined with experts, activists, and community action groups from the larger bioregion including Pondicherry, Villupuram, Cuddalore, Marakkanam, Vanur, and Bahour in a collective effort to focus on stewardship for water and biodiversity. The seven week long festival – which was launched on World Wetlands Day and ended on World Water Day – aimed to celebrate “our deep connection with water” and to support the collaborative partnerships needed for integrated management of water resources. There were walks and talks, workshops and roundtables, performances and ceremonies, celebrations and fun, drawing in, along the way, an array of government officials and departments, and community members of all ages and all walks of life.

A '*Neer Kudam Yatra*' (water pot procession) was flagged off by filling ceremonial pots with water from Ousteri and Kaliveli, the larger bioregion's historically important but massively deteriorated wetlands. Over the course of the water festival, these pots passed in ceremonial relay from one village and school to the next, to symbolise the interconnectedness of water and life. As part of the *yatra*, WaterFest partners conducted school awareness campaigns where students learned about and pledged their commitment to protect water resources. In the immediate Auroville bioregion alone, Mohanam Village Heritage Centre and Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) brought the initiative to 23 schools. 300 women from nearby villages also participated in the same initiative at AVAG's premises in Irumbai.

The final week of events was hosted in Auroville under the banner of the now annual 'Water Matters' mela. Volunteers turned up to prepare the large ground opposite Auroville Visitor's Center next to the water recharge ponds. Colourful displays spoke to the wisdom of water retention and recharge through vegetation and forest cover, rainwater harvesting, hydroponics, waterless toilets, green detergent, and more. The ponds were turned into a swimming hole to allow people to escape the rising summer heat, and the skies obliged one day with a sudden cloudburst of 42 millimetres rainfall which raised the pond levels by a hefty ten centimetres. No planned event could have better demonstrated the value of water catchments.

Thematic talks and interactions took place at the Botanical Garden with Paul, at Revelation Forest with Island and Arun, at Solitude Farm with Krishna, at Humanscapes with Suhasini, and at Alok's water testing lab in Alankuppam. Giulio (CSR Geomatics) spoke about the rapidly changing water situation and the weather systems impacting the region. Jonah (Eternal Divers) shared the importance of knowing and relating to our oceans through a talk and a film about what he sees while scuba diving off the local coast. Aurofilio (PondyCAN!), Ponds Beach Restoration Project, Ponds Sailing Association), Arul (Nansay Restoration), Dr. Lucas (EcoPro, Auro Annam Farm), the WasteLess team, and Rajesh (Blue Planet Run, Peer Water Exchange) conveyed their perspectives, insights, and experience at presentations in Bharat Nivas.

In a talk on the last day, Deepika from Pebble Garden offered an historical perspective on water and land stewardship in the region. She noted how the region had enjoyed great agricultural variety and abundance, as well as societal wealth, over various past eras, even without perennial water sources. Temple inscriptions and written documents predating the colonial and industrial overexploitation of natural resources indicate a deep appreciation and understanding of the need to care for the water systems supporting life in the area.

This message resonates strongly with those who are aware of the incredibly precarious state of our water at present. The importance given to the ritualised *Neer Kudam Yatra* over the course of this year's WaterFest acknowledges that scientific or technological approaches and government intervention are required but inadequate to safeguard water resources. Deeply rooted community connection and action is crucial. And so in the final week, the *Neer Kudams* arrived at the staging ground in Auroville. Village elders and elected panchayat representatives emptied their kudams into a single large *panai* (vessel), and the mingled waters were later poured back into the smaller *neer kudams* to be later poured into the ponds of surrounding villages. The elders were joined by children, symbolically entrusting communal water resources and their well-being to the next generation. Old and young, all for water for all.

Gita



Above and below: *Neer Koodam* ceremonies in Auroville



Isai Ambalam School students clean up trash so it doesn't end up in our water bodies



A guided tour through pictorial exhibits in Auroville



Attentive audience for closing talks and performances in Auroville

Sun Word still rising

As my partner and I were talking about the history of Auroville's ongoing crisis, she encouraged me to read a specific book chronicling the early days of Auroville. I initially misheard the title as 'Sun-bird Rising' and searched unsuccessfully at the library for this title until a helpful librarian handed me what I should have been looking for: a book titled 'Sun Word Rising'. I found the book startlingly apposite to Auroville's present tumult, and I couldn't help musing about this sun-bird I had initially been searching for. Perhaps, like its mythic cousin the phoenix, the sun-bird perishes and is reborn, in the same way that Auroville appears to be reiterating the cycle of crisis that took place in the late 1970s.

For those who have not read the book, which was first published in 1980, Savitra describes the deeper evolutionary impulses behind Auroville and its purpose in this world, and also details the tensions and joys of the early days, the golden promise and later betrayal by the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS). The first part of the book conveys his spiritual quest in the third person, from the USA to meeting 'Her' in Pondicherry, and joining the nascent community in the shadeless heat of the then red eroded soil. The grandness and ambition of the Auroville spiritual project is always within touching distance. Soon after his arrival, he is renamed by Mother as Savitra and the book changes to the first person.

The 1960s era is evoked in its idealism, the sense of boundless possibility and new concepts like 'ecology' which started informing the zeitgeist. But mostly Savitra is a chronicler of the birth of the community, dating its age from the 1968 inauguration. It's an inspiring, yet unvarnished account of those beginnings, capturing the goodwill and creativity of the early forecomers. As with all that has worked in Auroville, it was through trial and error that the community grew; trees were planted for shade, bunds made to prevent erosion and enrich the topsoil, there were

experiments in food growing and house construction, etc. However, with Mother's passing in 1973, young, orphaned Auroville had to grow up quickly in a baptism of fire when faced with its first crisis of governance. As I read, I found myself exclaiming aloud at each uncanny resonance or reverberation between that first crisis and the current one.

Whilst there are certainly differences between the two eras, I offer these quotes (in italics) without commentary as a mirror to consider our present:

On how the city and growth are perceived

Roger (Anger) was interested "in building the city". He had had enough of this "community experience."...He was more than a bit frustrated that almost nothing of his master plan for Auroville - not even his prototype concept of Auromodele - had manifested. For him Auroville was bogged down between administrative incompetence in Pondicherry and the equally intransigent Aurovilians who were too lost in their quest for a "collective consciousness" to see the city.

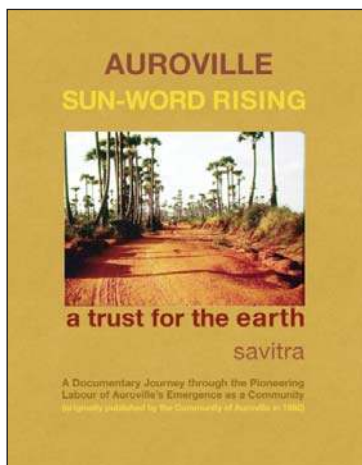
These two tendencies - planning and spontaneity - as well as all the classical dualities and contradictions that men oscillate between and fight the wars over in a foolish effort to establish the exclusive supremacy of one over the other, wrestled with themselves among the Aurovilians.

They didn't see that trees were paying back a much deeper debt, one with a thousand years of interest to the Earth.

On public image

(from Navajata) "Bad publicity harms the work and must be avoided and [the way to avoid it is to use] pictorial and brief progress reports." In other words don't look for the real solution, just keep up the image.

Nava: How can we justify to those looking to Auroville as an example all this sex and drugs. (Francis and I



look at each other wondering what Auroville he was talking about.)

On governance

Executive Committee of SAS Resolution. Resolved that the Society called Auroville which has filed papers at Cuddalore and which is arrogating to itself the rights of the SAS whose project is Auroville, is ill-conceived and mala fide and that the result will be the destruction of the Mother's Auroville and that immediate steps should be taken to secure its cancellation and/or nullification and stop this mischievous move.

This led into a deeper question which that week's meeting faced of 'whether we have the right to make our own decisions in such matters. Are we a policy-making group? If so, do we stick with our decisions or withdraw because of the result'. It was generally felt that we must take a very firm stand expressing our right to decide.

Thus was aired before Auroville as a whole under the limbs of an ancient Banyan tree the Great Blasphemy: let Auroville be free. The Aurovilians for the first time together, despite the efforts of Nava and others to abort it, Navajata which means 'new birth' heard themselves plainly speaking of autonomy and the right to be (...).

"We as representatives of the undersigned European centres, at a meeting in Paris on June 11, 1976, herewith openly declare that we no

longer have any confidence in the Trustees of the ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Soc and the Auro Trust. The way in which of late they have been handling affairs is, we are convinced, in important respects inconsistent with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and with the Charter of Auroville."

On administrative process

To tighten the screws the SAS executive committee amended the admissions form requiring even long term Aurovilians to sign in order to receive SAS's guarantee...[:]

The ideals of Auroville appeal to me and I request for permission to stay in Auroville. I accept the ideals and shall actively work for the realization. I have read this form and agree to all conditions mentioned in it. And will also abide by all administrative and other decisions of the executive committee of the SAS whether made so far or in future. Assuring you of my cooperation.

Nava: All you have to say is "I will collaborate with the SAS" and you will have your visa.

Harikant: If you support the new Society, then we can have nothing to do with you. Do you support the new Society?

Howard: Yes I support the new Society.

Harikant: Then we can have nothing to do with you.

The news spread like wildfire through Auroville. Nava was playing one of his last and deadliest trump cards. The visa. The blackmail was apparent. Francis in exchange for the Auroville Society and the obedience of Aurovilians.

On name-calling

...and Govind, a leader within the SAS ranks, began abusing Aurovilians in Hindi, accusing them of being 'colonialists' and 'anti-Indian'. (...) Govind continued their tirades and tantrums, picking out the Indians amongst us - Yusuf, Prem, Dipti, Arjun and called them 'traitors to the

nation'. When I asked Yusuf later what Govind had said in Hindi, he told me "only Hindi will be spoken in Auroville". The venom of racialism that expressed itself in that moment revealed what seethed beneath the rational façade.

Prescient insights

It was 28 February 1977, Auroville had completed its ninth year. Despite the Chairman, despite us. It would be because it had never been.

The image of the 'City' was still the index and definition through which most external bodies, particularly the Government, could relate to us, and consider their own involvement... Pushed from recognition that if we didn't look respectable and convincing - at least on paper - some well-intentioned other might officially begin to advise us and eventually implement the contents according to its own definition.

[In the context of the Government of India setting up a three-person committee on Auroville] Could this be the long-awaited Christmas present? ...but somehow something in all this was out of character for us, we had imperceptibly retired to the audience. Somehow it was cheating. We need never have been given anything which we had not in some way already become.

As Savitra's tale came to a close, this last note of wisdom resonated strongly with me. Underneath all our current churning there is a call beyond the conflict for us to better come together as a community, to use the difficulties to deepen our connection with the vision of Auroville. Savitra's ability to sense some of these deeper currents are as true today as they were almost fifty years ago.

Peter

Sun Word Rising: A Trust for the Earth by Savitra is available from <https://www.auro-books.com/auroville-sun-word-rising/> for free downloading, or in hard copy from amazon.com

REFLECTION

Revisiting history: people, power, and politics

Of all the four parks that grace the city area of Auroville, Darkali is the most beautiful of them all. It is hard to explain this to people who have not spent enough time in nature to develop an environmental consciousness. Nature is not dumb. The wilderness, or even just pockets of land that have not been totally subjugated by the human will, have a silent, healing presence. When I am alone in such places, I feel it. Away from the chatter of human beings and their noisy devices, the silence of nature comforts me and reminds me that I am a mere strand in the web of life. Medical science has also documented the beneficial effect of nature on human beings.

Darkali, for me, despite its fitness track, is not a recreational park. It is a sanctuary and, like the forested canyons of Auroville, a reminder of how humans can collaborate with the Spirit of Matter to bring back life into a dying land. The undulating landscape of Darkali, etched with gullies and canyons, had been carefully curated by its stewards to form a series of cascading catchment ponds. Aesthetically designed bridges that blended into the green and brown landscape gave passage across these ponds and check dams. As the biggest water reservoir in the city area, it was not surprising to see that even after months since the last downpour, there was still water in one of the ponds in Darkali. Given the availability of water, the slow regeneration of soil through the accumulation of biomass or leaf litter, the bounty of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest that provides food to birds and animals throughout the year, it is little wonder that Darkali became a sanctuary for wildlife. Some endangered species like Honey Buzzards are known to roost only in this magical, verdant park.

The insistence on a perfectly circular road 9.1 metres wide through this landscape, without even allowing the slightest



Children swimming in a water catchment pond in Darkali

concession of a small detour to maximise water catchment, is unfathomable, even when the importance of the *yantric* form of the Galaxy Town Plan is explained to me. Born as a Hindu, I have travelled widely in India and marvelled at the geometrical symmetry of temple towns that are laid out in concentric squares. But I cannot subscribe to the rigid imposition of form over function. Especially in Auroville, where the individual was given the space, the freedom, and the opportunity, to grow individually and collectively and collaborate with the Spirit.

Walking through the bunds and depressions of Darkali yesterday as the chain saws hummed and tall trees toppled with that

unnerving, rude cracking sound, I was reminded of the history of the land. Of how it once was, according to the Irumbai temple inscriptions, a dense forest teeming with life, and how succeeding colonial armies of the French and the British had raped the land and stripped it bare, till it turned to desert and dust. I was reminded of the power of the tropics, of how simple, basic conservation of soil and water allows nature to heal. And of the selfless labour of the people who, over half-a-century, had planted, sheltered and watered seedlings that sprouted to life, and in turn, gave birth to more life. The lessons of history here are not lost to me: people in absolute power tend to destroy and subject matter to their will; anarchies, though frustratingly ungovernable, when based on the principle of stewardship and not ownership sometimes do manifest beauty in ways that enhance the collective.

The passage of days as we go through these turbulent times in Auroville is agonizingly slow. And the future is shrouded in uncertainty. At this present moment, often feeling forced to choose between warring sides ("are you with us or against us?"), I do not have the clarity to state

what benefits and what ills the current trends of development will bring. For development is not necessarily benign. And the lessons of history are best understood in hindsight. In a few decades, perhaps, it will be clearer to take an account of what did we lose, what did we gain, and overall, what we did learn that will help us to take another small step together, collectively.

Today, I simply mourn for all that we are losing. And I, irrationally perhaps, still hold on to that fragile, fleeting hope: "beyond all ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field where we can meet". (Rumi)

Bindu



Tree cutting resumes

The FO ATDC announced it would begin assisting the CPWD team in clearing the Crown path, including the cutting of trees, on 9th March in accordance with the authorization given by the Joint Commission as per the National Green tribunal directive. A number of men with chainsaws entered Darkali and began cutting trees, in spite of protests from some residents who the FO working groups claimed were obstructing the work. However, the RA WC and ATDC pointed out that the people who 'obstructed' the work were not the people who "have been holding up" development for decades, and that it was bound to meet with resistance as the vast majority of Aurovilians think that the Crown Road should pass through Darkali with a minimum of damage. In fact, while the FO ATDC claimed that the work would be done in strict accordance with the report of the Joint Committee of the Green Tribunal, it was reported that trees were cut outside the width specified by the Joint Committee, and that up that 50 extra trees were unnecessarily cut. In all, it is reported that almost 200 trees were cut in Darkali.

Legal update

On 14th March a 'miscellaneous petition' was heard at the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in Chennai. The court order, posted on the following weekend, noted the concern of the applicants that the AVFO "is cutting trees even outside the stretch of crown road work/beyond the recommendation of the Joint Committee." The counsel appearing for the AVFO subsequently stated that the AVFO will not go beyond what is recommended in the Joint Committee report. The RA WC noted that "the NGT has clearly reminded the AVFO to respect the original ruling and the existing Joint Committee report, so only the marked and listed trees within the designated 9.1m in Darkali can be cut." The next hearing on this matter is scheduled for the 5th of April to decide whether or not to reconvene the Joint Committee and order them to complete the survey of trees and water bodies on the planned Crown trajectory.

Crown Road update

Following on from his previous report, an Aurovilian has shared a further technical report detailing the progress of the road work. He points out that the concrete slabs delivered to the site so far do not fit together properly, meaning that the contractor has been forced to take remedial action. Moreover, the small amount of road that has been laid is already in a poor condition and, according to the

Aurovilian, will not withstand everyday use. He is calling for all work on the Crown to be paused for the moment, and for two professional audits to be implemented, one technical and one financial.

Damaging tree roots

An Aurovilian arborist is concerned by tree roots being severed during work on the Crown Right of Way. He points out that trees with roots severed one metre from the stem are much easier to push over, and advises that is usually better to dig under tree roots instead of severing them to install cables and pipes.

Minutes of 60th and 61st meetings of the Governing Board

These minutes were only released recently. In the minutes of the 60th meeting, held on 12th July 2022, it was noted that the Board approved a proposal in principle for the construction of studio flats for 1,000 individuals to attract people from various countries to enhance the spiritual activities of the community. The Board suggested that certain activities should be carried out weekly in Auroville, either online or off-line. They include spiritual programmes to "promote the Sri Aurobindo philosophy and The Mother vision to acquire more piece (sic) and knowledge for the purpose to stay in Auroville". The Board also approved getting Environmental Clearance for the township according to the Green Tribunal judgement, with the support of ABC Techno Labs, Chennai. The minutes of the 61st meeting, held on 8th November 2022, noted, among other things, that the Auroville Foundation Regulations 2020 need to be reviewed and updated/amended, and requested the Organisation and Governance Committee of the Governing Board to finalized the draft regulation, in consultation with some senior residents of Auroville. While drafting, they should pay attention, among other things, to criteria for people to be allowed to stay in Auroville, and formulate a Code of Conduct for residents in line with Auroville's ideals, including the Charter and Mother's guidelines. The Governing Board also advised that programmes should be organized every quarter for Newcomers and residents, to "ensure that all aspects of the Integral Yoga are continually nurtured in Auroville", and noted that all healthy residents should take up meaningful work for the collective for a minimum of five hours a day.

AVI board members meet Secretary

On February 18th, the Chairman and International Secretary of Auroville International met with the Secretary. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss and exchange on several important issues. The Secretary affirmed that there is freedom of expression in Auroville, which they had said was very important for their work. On this line they requested her, among other things, to arrange for every-

one to be able to use free and uncensored e-mail traffic; to allow the editors of News and Notes to be inclusive and include the reports of the RA groups; to ensure that Auronet is free from harsh censorship; and to ensure better communication and flow of information to the whole community, built upon Auroville and worldwide recognized standards such as due process, proportionality, sincerity and substantiation of allegations.

Peace Table meeting

At the Secretary's invitation, a group of diverse Aurovilians met with Jay Naidoo around the Peace Table. The atmosphere was peaceful. Among the points mentioned were that Aurovilians needed to be assured of safety and security, verbal violence in speech is not acceptable, that everything possible should be done to solve the situation of the young Aurovilian who received a Leave India notice, and that rebuilding harmony between the GB, IAC and RA is vital for Auroville's progress.

Consul Generals visit Auroville

Recently, Consul Generals from France, Russia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Bangladesh and Thailand visited Auroville. At the Unity Pavilion, they were given an overview of Auroville, its founding vision based on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and its aims and activities, in a presentation and talk by the Secretary, Auroville Foundation. The Honorary Consuls of Spain, South Korea, Seychelles and Switzerland joined online. Tamil Nadu Governor and Chairman of Auroville's Governing Board, Shri R.N Ravi, in a recorded message called upon the visiting Consul Generals to encourage people, and especially the youth of their countries, to explore Auroville and also to participate as volunteers.

News and Notes update

The RA Auroville Council and Working Committee announced they were relieving the editors of the News and Notes of their responsibility and looking for replacements as the editors were not "giving a fair representation to the voice of the community". They clarified that "the News and Notes is a community-led and community-financed platform for sharing information, and we wish to uphold the role and authority of the Residents' Assembly as enshrined in the Auroville Foundation Act (1988)".

Changed land stewardship

The FO ATDC announced that "In order to move forward with the development of Auroville City as per the Master Plan and considering that non-ownership is a core value of life in Auroville, going forward all rights for development of the Auroville lands will follow land use as defined in the Master Plan and by the ATDC, and endorsed by FAMC. Individual rights over land or other assets, as has been practiced till now, will change now to

community ownership as per the planning parameters by ATDC and caretaker agreements worked out by FAMC and its subgroups". This implies, they explained, that land stewardships given or as understood in the past, especially in the City Master Plan area, "no longer hold validity in the context it was practiced. L'avenir d'Auroville / ATDC is the authorized body that will decide on the land use of all Auroville lands. City Center and the lands in the City Master Plan area will immediately be directly under the joint work team of ATDC and FAMC."

General meeting

On 16th March there was a General Meeting in Unity Pavilion. Around 300 residents attended. The RA FAMC made a call for resource persons to assist them as they are having difficulties managing their work as they have only a three person team. The RAS also needs new team members and/or resource persons. There was a large show of support for keeping the AV Council room available for the RA working groups, with many more people saying that they would sign up to help. Finally, there was a call made by an Aurovilian, based on a discussion he had during a recent delegation to Delhi. The request is for all Aurovilians to write a one page letter on what brought them to Auroville, why, and what their contribution has been to building the City. The intention of this is to be able to share these accounts with relevant persons in Delhi, as these people would be more sensitive to personal approaches that are both heartfelt and give information about the practical and financial contribution Aurovilians have made.

Roger Anger centenary

On 23th March, on the occasion of Roger Anger's centenary, L'avenir d'Auroville / ATDC and the 150th Sri Aurobindo year programme group welcomed people to India Space, Bharat Nivas, for a commemorative event in honour of Roger's work and legacy for Auroville. The announcement said that "His centenary dovetails perfectly with Sri Aurobindo's 150th birth anniversary and India's 75th year of independence, with his seminal contribution towards a conscious urbanism that will stand out for all time, both for Auroville and India, but also for the world." After the lighting of a candle in Roger's memory by his wife, Jacqueline Lacoste, many elder Aurovilians and friends shared memories and anecdotes of their encounters with, or long years of association, with the man. Anupama, who worked with Roger and is the present Head of Urban Design of the FO ATDC, has also created a video in homage to Roger.

Going digital

The FO FAMC announced that the Auroville Foundation is keen to follow up the Digital India initiatives within Auroville also. To facilitate

the move from cash to digital transactions quickly and effectively, all executives and managers who have yet to adopt digital payments are required now to register with the TalamPay (including point-of-sale UPI QRcodes) developed internally in Auroville by Talam.

Accounts not approved

The FO FAMC also reports that the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has not certified the accounts for the year 2021-2022 for Auroville units/ trusts and consolidated accounts of Auroville Foundation because they are not in the Ministry of Education approved format. Meanwhile work is in progress to review units which have performed poorly over many years to strengthen them or close their activities.

Dream Divine series

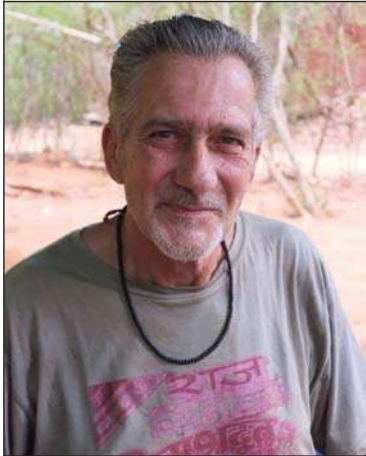
Savitri Bhavan has launched a project called 'The Dream Divine Series'. The goal of the project is to make Newcomers understand the Aims and Ideals of Auroville, learn about the life and works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, and the Integral Yoga.

Introductory Volunteer Programme (IVP)

The IVP, a programme that will take volunteers on a journey of discovery through Auroville, is being resumed. This five day programme is a unique opportunity for volunteers to experience the diverse realities of Auroville and to meet fellow volunteers & Aurovilians. It will include a review of Mother and Sri Aurobindo's works, an introduction to Auroville, its history, its vision of the future, tours of various Auroville units and farms, and cultural, ecological and educational visits.

PASSING

Gérard Arnaud



Aurovilian Gérard Arnaud passed away on Thursday, March 17 due to cardiac arrest. Gérard had started coming to Auroville about 10 years ago and had become Aurovilian in 2017. Recently he had returned to France with his daughter Magda. While in Auroville, Gérard had been mainly working in various kitchens as a cook, including at the Cafeteria of the Visitors' Centre

About Auroville Today

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