

Severe beach erosion at Sri Ma community

The gradual erosion of the Tamil Nadu coast is a well-known phenomenon. Erosion happens when the shoreline is worn away by the movement of sand and waves. In Tamil Nadu, for about eight months, the wind and the sea current flow from the south to the north, carrying sand along with them. During the northeast monsoon, for about four months, they reverse their direction.

When hard structures like piers or groynes are built extending into the sea they block the natural movement of sand. As a result, sand piles up at one side of the structure, while the opposite side loses sand and begins to erode. According to an article in *The Hindu* newspaper of August 4th, 2024, the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR) has reported that 42.7% of Tamil Nadu's coastline is facing erosion, exacerbated by hard structures such as groynes, jetties and piers, with the number of these structures increasing since 2022. But studies have shown that groynes are ineffective and just move the erosion northwards.

Pondicherry too has been suffering from beach erosion, ever since a pier was constructed in 1989 to facilitate its harbour entrance. This led to sand accumulation on the south side and to the complete erosion of Pondicherry's beaches to the north. In 2017, a beach nourishment project was taken up by the Pondicherry Government along with the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), which successfully restored some of the beachfront of the Promenade.

This, however, did not solve the problems that the pier's construction brought to Tamil Nadu villages north of Pondicherry. They experienced beach and land erosion, with land and houses disappearing into the sea. In order to protect these villages, the Tamil Nadu government has since been building a number of groynes, but each groyne moved the erosion further northward. The one solution that did work for a specific locality was creating a seawall, a wall built in the sea parallel to the coast, which benefited the Auroville community Samarpan.

The Auroville beach communities

Once upon a time, Auroville had ten beach communities. Now there are only eight left. The most southern ones, about six kilometres north of Pondicherry, are Quiet, home to the Six Healing Center, Samarpan, Samutra and Gokulam. These communities suffered badly from beach erosion, losing at least 50 metres of their beachfront land, with the beaches completely disappearing or being vastly reduced in size. Efforts to protect these communities from further erosion have largely failed. In 2019, with the help of a 13 lakhs private donation, Quiet built a wall of sand bags to protect its land and buildings, but this gradually disappeared in the following two years. Yet, these communities continue to exist, thanks to a seawall and a groyne.

The communities of Repos and Waves, further north, were not so lucky. Google maps still refer to the beach bordering these communities as 'Auroville Beach', but in fact, that beach no longer exists. Nor do these communities, their houses, the teashop and the bathing facilities created for the many Aurovilians who went for a swim on lazy Sundays. The land and buildings have been swallowed by the sea.

Further north are Varuna Beach, the location of Auroville's future desalination plant, and its neighbour Simplicity. They escaped beach erosion as they are protected by a groyne that was added to the existing groyne field by the Government shortly after Varuna finished building its own fortification within its compound: a wall of about two metres deep and six metres wide at the base. This wall was never tested.



One of Sri Ma's palm trees is falling into the sea

The enclave of Kalapet

About 5km north of Auroville is the town of Kalapet, an enclave of the Union Territory of Puducherry. Situated on the coast, it is fully surrounded by Tamil Nadu. It was annexed by the French in 1703 and has been a part of the Union Territory ever since. Pondicherry University and the Puducherry Technological University are located here, as is the Auroville beach community of Sri Ma. Until last year, it was not affected by beach erosion, but in August this year erosion started.

Sheryl runs Sri Ma's extensive guest resort. She and her husband, Daniel, are badly affected by the erosion. "The Tamil Nadu government has been building groynes from the northern border of the city of Pondicherry to the Kalapet enclave. One of them caused a lot of damage to a coastal village. The fishermen lost their beach, which was necessary for berthing their boats, and many houses and land were destroyed. They protested by blocking the East Coast highway for some hours. The government took notice and, in January this year, built another groyne at a distance of 500 metres from the border with Kalapet. That groyne is now causing us misery. Two months ago, the sea was a hundred meters from our fence and there was a lovely beach. Today the beach has gone, the sea has swallowed large acres of Sri Ma, and our house is on the verge of collapse. There's going to be immense erosion in the months of August and September. We have called for help from Aurovilians, and quite a few turned up to help put lining material, which was a leftover from the Matrimandir Lake construction, over the eroded land. That has helped to some extent, but it won't be permanent."

The solution is either building a new groyne north of Sri Ma, or creating a sea wall as has been done near Samarpan. "We've heard that the Government of Puducherry has been talking about building groynes to protect this enclave and its three villages, but

we do not know if this is now a firm decision and if so, when it will be done. We are afraid it might come too late," says Sheryl. "This is an emergency because the sea isn't waiting. Measures have to be taken now, otherwise Auroville will lose half of Sri Ma if not more, and with that, the large contributions this community has been making to Auroville from the income generated by the resort and its Tanto restaurant."

Good news might be in the offing. On August 19th Auroville learned that Dr. Ramana Murthy, the Director of the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), and his team visited Sri Ma and inspected the land loss and the severely eroded beach. They concluded that to stop any further loss of land, a stone wall needs to be immediately constructed along the eroded stretch of the shoreline, for which NCCR will send the design. Later on, this stretch can be integrated with the Shoreline Management Plan made by the NCCR for the entire Tamil Nadu coast. The North East monsoon will begin in a month's time so it is expected that then there will be sand accumulation on the beach, which will then bring some relief. The funding of the wall, said Dr. Ramana Murthy, has to be organised by the Auroville Foundation or the Government of Pondicherry. As funding for the wall had not been secured by the time this issue went to the press, more loss of Sri Ma land may be expected in the month to come.

But what about the lost communities of Repos and Waves? Is there any hope for reviving them? Vasu, who lives in a tiny left-over area of Repos, believes there is. "The Government of Tamil Nadu wants to build a few groynes in this area," he says. "When that happens, land accretion will occur and Repos and Waves will come back into existence." Too good to be true? "Wait till the beginning of next year," he says confidently. "Then this work is sure to start."

Carel



Protecting the coast with leftover cloth from the Matrimandir Lake construction



Sheril and Daniel's house is close to the sea now



More palm trees have disappeared into the sea

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A challenging and controversial task

Torkil Dantzer joined Auroville in 2010. In 2011 he created the wood-working unit *Prakrit* after Cyclone Thane to create value from the fallen trees. With a background in economics and development, he has also been part of groups which have explored ways in which the Auroville economy can be strengthened.

In 2022 the Foundation appointed him a member of the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC). The Funds and Assets Management Committee is responsible for developing Auroville's financial and economic policies in alignment with its vision and ideals. It is convened by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation.

This is the first time that a member of this FAMC has given a fuller explanation of their objectives and the challenges they are facing, as well as providing responses to some of the concerns that their actions have raised.

The past

Auroville Today: *I've always found it difficult to categorise you. You are trained as a mathematician and an economist, but you are also a craftsman – working with wood – and you have an interest in philosophy...*

Torkil: When I was a young student in Denmark and had to decide what to study, we were presented with four pages of all the subjects available, and asked to indicate which ones we wanted to follow. It was very difficult for me because I could have ticked 200 different things. Actually, my first interest was in archaeology, maths was my other big subject, although philosophy also attracted me. But most people studying these subjects end up in teaching, and I don't see myself as a teacher.

So I have done many things, like the restoration of buildings. However, as I had studied the economy of the developing countries, my focus became development projects in many of these places, including India. At one time I was chairman of an organisation that was supporting schools and orphanages all over the world. We needed to do a new project in Africa and I went to one of the richest guys in Denmark to get a substantial donation. I got the donation, but he also got me! I agreed to work with him and his wife in managing a corporate responsibility fund for *Bestseller*, the Danish clothing company.

One of our projects was restoration work in Tranquebar after the tsunami, and this is where I first came into contact with Aurovilians. [*For the Tranquebar story see AV Today 269, December 2011, eds.*]

One of the common threads in your career seems to be an interest in social responsibility.

Yes, I wasn't so interested in the money side as in the social side of development as I saw this was the most needed thing to get most countries on the right track.

This aspect of social responsibility was also evident in your plan to make both a high-end line and an affordable low-end line of furniture in Prakrit, your woodworking unit in Auroville.

In principle I also wanted to make affordable furniture but in reality it's very difficult. If you want to make good quality but affordable furniture the only way to do it is to mass-produce it, and for that you need a big market. It's a problem that is not only *Prakrit's* but also Auroville's other income generating units. They were told they should make affordable products for Auroville but most of them only make more expensive, high-end products because there's no economic survival in the lower lines and the market in Auroville is not very big. *Upasana* suggested making cheap clothes for Aurovilians, but then people wanted many different designs, different colours, while affordable clothing means a restricted range of products. But Aurovilians wanted both cheapness and a wide choice.

I think we have become extremely individualised, and this is one of our big problems because the larger community suffers as a result as many solutions, like providing everybody's basic needs through a 'prosperity' system, are only possible through simple collective solutions.



Torkil

The FAMC's task

What do you see as the main task of this FAMC?

The focus of the present FAMC is that everybody who works for the community should be taken care of, including their housing and basic needs. We have still a long way to go here. For "Prosperity" for all costs a lot of money, which means that the income of the community would need to be three times bigger than it is now.

However, the last two years of our work in the FAMC has mainly been an exercise in cleaning up, and I'm still quite surprised by how much mess we have managed to accumulate. In all types of units, we encountered everything from direct fraud to people starting units outside but keeping dummy units in Auroville in order not to contribute to the community but to maximise their personal income. One thing I found surprising, especially in a community like this is, how do you defend these actions to yourself? What kind of story do you build for yourself that what you are doing is actually okay? Coming from a Danish socialist thinking background, this has really shocked me.

How widespread is this?

There are quite a number of hardcore offenders, but there is an even larger grey area where things are not being done in the way they should be done.

And it's not just the units. Housing needed a big clean-up because there have been many strange things happening over the years. Then again, some of the service units have ignored all the GST rules [*the Goods and Services Tax was launched by the Government of India in July 2017, eds.*], thinking it was not applicable to them, so now the GST system wants crores of money. We don't know how to handle that. Basically we could go bankrupt if they keep on pushing.

And when we started looking at SAIER's budget, we saw we had something like 220 teachers on maintenance allowances for 490 students. For many years, much of the money for the teachers came from the Ministry of Education so we were very easy about putting people on teachers' maintenances, but over a couple of years that stopped and our Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) had to cover all these maintenances. What was even worse was that the BCC had no proper accounting system, just a number of Excel sheets. From an auditing point of view it was a nightmare.

Regarding the economic health of the community, if you see the income over the last 15 years and you correct for inflation, we actually have less money per capita in Auroville today than we had 15 years ago. On the surface Auroville looks prosperous, but that's the result of people's personal money: it doesn't mean that this all flows into the community to support community needs.

Most of the things we are dealing with now have been known for years, but former FAMCs, for various reasons, have not been not been able to deal with them, so everything was put under the carpet. But the carpet became sky-high!

One of the reasons former FAMCs could not handle these issues was that they had no real power. Today, you have that authority.

Yes, but I'm not a person who likes to use a big stick. Actually, the only (worldly) authority we have is through the Foundation, and if that disappears we are back to zero. But even today, when we tell people that they have to change because what they're doing is not allowed, often they try to ignore us because this is what Aurovilians have been doing for many years.

So the clean-up you are involved in consists largely of a lot of belt-tightening to make Auroville more economically viable, while making sure that units and activities are compliant with Indian regulations?

No. It is partly redirecting expenses from the areas where it is not very needed, as well as streamlining the accounting of units, thereby creating more contribution for City Services.

Do you see light at the end of the tunnel in terms of this cleaning process or is there still much to be done?

A lot of the work has been done but there is still a long way to go. We have done a lot of cleaning up regarding things like GST compliance. But the big change will be in how the economy and the community function in the future. Will people start working with a different attitude? Because the community can only exist if people work to build the community. At present, a lot of people seem to prioritise their own economy above Auroville's; they feel that if they pay their community contribution they are free to do whatever they like. But if they don't focus on working for the community, where will the growth and funds for the community come from?

The cost

No doubt, the FAMC has to deal with financial shortfalls as well as abuses. The question is if it is being done in the best possible way. Your work has resulted in much pain and social disruption, and the impact has not only been financial but also social, and this has extended far beyond Auroville. For example, the decision to cut the foresters' maintenances resulted in many forest employees from the villages being laid off. Many of these workers had worked all their lives in Auroville and they are too old to find other jobs, even though their families rely upon their income. From a strictly economic point of view there may be too many maintenances for the amount of forest, but isn't the financial and social cost of cuts like these disproportionate?

After talking to the government forest department people the conclusion was we need perhaps 12 – 18 people to steward our forests, whereas more than 100 maintenances and staff salaries were being paid. This was because historically the focus was on planting the forest. But that was many years ago and, like so many other things in Auroville, this situation just 'froze' and was never adapted to the present need. There were a number of attempts to get a meeting with the Forest Group to discuss this, but they refused, saying they did not want to discuss any change. A conflict like this has no good ending. The administration was left with only two options: to surrender or cut the funding, so we cut the money. I don't think it should have ended like this. It ended up as a stupid situation, a black and white story, which nobody wanted.

But there's a feeling at present that for the FAMC money has become the 'Sovereign Lord', and that financial health and efficiency is being prioritised over people's welfare. For example, making the Auroville contribution compulsory even for those with limited means, or making people pay for Auroville services, or deciding to pause the 'Silver Fund' which supports older Aurovilians who have been here for many years, all feels like the destruction of an unwritten contract that says that when you offer your work to Auroville and its development, Auroville in return would take care of your basic needs.

But how many people are really working for Auroville? And people are still getting help from

the Silver Fund, although in future we want to ensure that it is only those who are in financial need.

But is the FAMC's approach one which balances economic needs with people's needs?

The Greeks' philosophy was that you should always seek the middle way. Everything has been totally out of balance in Auroville, so when you try to correct it you often have to go to the other side. Maybe we haven't succeeded in creating a balance. But the middle-of-the-road seems to be a very difficult place to find. Also, the FAMC has very limited possibilities of navigating its way at present as countless court cases filed by Aurovilians have created roadblocks in an already complex roadmap.

Lack of information breeds rumours, distrust, and the FAMC has not been good at communicating what they are doing, and why. Most of the communications people receive from the FAMC have come as diktats or bald statements that their maintenances will cease. There has been no appreciation of the work that people have been doing, sometimes for many years in difficult circumstances. It all seems cold, lacking in basic humanity.

I agree, although I think our communication now is much better than it was before. But it is not easy to find the right words when you have to tell people who have been used to one way of living for many years that it is not working and they have to change. However, when people have lost maintenances for work that is no longer needed, they have always been called to a meeting and an attempt made to find other relevant work for them.

The FAMC could have also explained to the community what the larger problem is and what has to change, because not everybody is aware of the depth or extent of the problems that the FAMC is confronting. There would still have been disruption, pain, but at least more people would have understood the need.

It's a fair comment. But it has not been easy because there is a push from many sides which made it more difficult for us to communicate with the community.

Is this pressure coming from above, from the Foundation Office or the Governing Board?

No, from other Aurovilians. Some have pushed us to be much more open about the abuses. We have decided not to, as it could have involved serious legal consequences for the people involved. But I'm not sure that it wouldn't have been best to publish details about all the worst cases, especially because some of the people involved keep on pretending they're not doing anything wrong. For if we made it public, they would have to handle their own mess.

Contradictions?

I also wonder to what extent the present actions of the FAMC may actually contradict their own objectives. For example, you wish to stimulate economic growth in Auroville, but how many new people will be drawn to Auroville or be tempted to start new enterprises in the present disrupted circumstances?

We are hopeful. Of course, the economy will not flourish if there is no trust, and there is a trust-deficit at present. But there's still a lot of clearing to do to simplify our present structure because for some reason we created this extreme complexity of 700 units and activities. And before we can trust the accounts, the management and contributions of all these units, it does not make sense to start growing the economy larger. If you start by growing an existing mess, you will end up with a much bigger mess.

Regarding bringing new people to Auroville, I think we need to overhaul our entry process. If you're looking at a normal organisation, you're looking for people who you need to fulfil a particular task. That has never been done here, and I don't think it should be the only criterion. But we have to find a middle way: to look for people who have both the values and the skill sets, because if you don't value the latter you may not be able to run the community.

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To grow a community you need not only dreamers, but also practical people with skills on many levels.

Of course, there is disruption at the moment. Whenever an organisation grows bigger and more complex, changes have to be made, and this creates a lot of disturbance. However, Auroville as an organisation has been very static for many years, with a management structure which had difficulty in implementing needed changes, even though accumulated wrongdoings or unnecessary things were strangling the functioning and growth of the community. This dysfunctionality has been known about for many years. The previous Governing Board initiated a community Retreat, where all these problems and the ‘elephants in the room’ were identified and solutions found, but afterwards everybody went back to their old ways! The present Governing Board is addressing the same issues, but with a determination that they have to be solved. [see box]

The big challenge in Auroville at the moment is how to change the present culture where there are a lot of individualistic projects and less emphasis on growing and working for the collective. Also, most of the work which should actually be done by Aurovilians is done by hired workers.

The old Greek word for crisis meant ‘catastrophe’ but also ‘new opportunities’. In development projects around the world whenever there is a crisis, like an earthquake, there is actually a window of opportunity of a few weeks when cultural changes can happen very fast. So I would say that it’s a bit sad if Auroville does not use the present crisis as a way of growing, of changing the way we have been doing things.

But the FAMC is attempting to do this through centralisation, and through creating more bureaucracy. As quick decisions often have to be made by business units, won’t this make it difficult for them?

But the units will still have their full freedom to make business decisions, as long as they adhere to the Code of Conduct for units. The FAMC’s role is to provide the structure and oversee the activities.

Centralisation also tends to create uniformity, which militates against creativity.

True, but for a community with less than 2000 adults to have so many so-called business units is nonsense: the idea that everybody should have their own activity doesn’t make sense. For one thing, it creates a huge accounting system, and as the quality of the accounting has been very poor the consolidation of all these accounts has been very problematic. The correction was very much needed, but it is always painful for everybody when this pressure comes, because everybody has to correct something. In Auroville I think we have been quite disrespectful of the rules for very long, but now there’s no way around compliance.

I’m not a big fan of bureaucracy, but there is something called good bureaucracy. And you can’t run a complex entity like the present Auroville when there is no system.

The question of freedom

But, still, is the kind of economic efficiency model the FAMC is applying today appropriate for an experiment like Auroville which requires a certain amount of freedom and, like any experiment, may tend to be ‘messy’ at times?

I don’t believe the economy should be the only thing that should govern Auroville, and in the sense Auroville is an experiment we should allow a lot of things to happen. But even in a spiritual community you have to be very respectful of the resources you use; in fact you should be even more respectful. And I think some Aurovilians have had a huge disrespect for anything like efficiency or money.

We all appreciate freedom, but I was brought up in a socialist Denmark and learned that my personal freedom is linked to everybody else’s personal freedom, and that I had to limit my personal freedom for the greater good of the larger community. I think a lot of people in Auroville want a more extreme freedom than most spiritual communities would give. If it was an ashram, our freedom would be very limited. I understand that Auroville is different, but we have gone very far to the other side of the road.

Also, economically the only freedom we can have in Auroville is if we can manage to generate our own income. If you’re financially supported, there is a danger that somebody will take the decisions for you. The sentence, ‘Auroville does not belong to anybody in particular’ is something we should constantly aspire to: for if Auroville kept its house in order, nobody would intervene.

You paint a rather bleak picture of Aurovilians gaming the system for their own advantage. But are so many people taking advantage? Also, while one shouldn’t excuse wrongdoing, doesn’t the system itself make life difficult for many people? For example, people coming to Auroville are often asked to donate a lot of non-refundable money to get accommodation, maintenances hardly suffice to support a family, the structure of the Foundation is not business-friendly, and nationals from other countries are under the constant threat of having their visa withdrawn if the government so decides. In these circumstances, where many people already feel vulnerable and hard-pressed to survive, the actions of the present FAMC are seen to be coercive and lacking in understanding of the serious difficulties they are creating. While acknowledging that the FAMC has a difficult task, do you feel that the FAMC has made mistakes? Could you have done certain things better, and if so, how?

Sure we have all made mistakes, and a number of things could have been done better. But the environment the FAMC has had to navigate in the last two years has been very complex, with more than 30 court cases constantly putting roadblocks up, and many using the common strategy for avoiding accountability and change – delay, deny and deflect – a strategy that it sometimes seems Auroville has perfected to the core. Solutions found in collaboration will always be better and mutually acceptable. But it takes two to tango – only one dancing becomes a bit awkward. However, things are improving now, as most people now accept that the changes are needed and are here to stay.

Regarding the issue of ‘vulnerability’, Auroville could not take place anywhere else in the world, and we should be daily grateful that India has held this project for so many years and with a large degree of freedom. With few formalities, everybody can start activities, even foreigners without a work permit can engage in economic activities, as long as the purpose is to benefit the community. However, if you want to earn money for your own purpose, for sure you have come to the wrong place.

The next step

What happens after the FAMC has completed its ‘cleaning’ work. Do you have ideas about what the next step in Auroville’s development could look like?

I have worked a lot in development, and learned there has never been a beautiful well-planned development anywhere in the world. Development is by nature messy. Even in countries where I’ve seen good development, when you talk to the people who were part of the process they say they did not know what would happen; they were just plain lucky that it turned out well. Of course, if you don’t do the best that you can, you will also fail. So this idea that you can take somebody from point A to point B in an orderly manner in a society which is highly complex like Auroville’s is probably an illusion.

We in the FAMC are painfully aware that the effect of our long ‘cleaning’ work has a negative impact on the growth potential of Auroville.

To a large degree, Auroville’s economy depends upon us selling things outside, and I don’t think we can change this. 80% of what we basically consume has to be ‘imported’. As we have no way of making it, we have to ‘export’ to pay for this. But we can help the commercial units to grow.

Some years ago, a group of us created an integral entrepreneurial lab to help them do this. The dream was to create a centre where all the requisite knowledge, from marketing to finance, is available for everybody, and everybody could avail that knowledge at any stage of their growth. The main aim was to grow a few units much bigger. However, we learned that the unit executives were very reluctant to grow the unit larger than they could personally manage, to avoid the next step of delegating responsibility and so losing full control.

And nobody was allowed to question this decision to stay small. The funny thing about Auroville is that while there is no ownership of a unit, in some ways ownership is stronger here than outside because outside you are accountable to others, like a board and shareholders. Anyway, this is one reason why Auroville consists of many small units which are unable to generate much income for the community.

But there are around 50 units which have some capacity and potential to grow. We call them ‘beautiful bonsai units’ because they want to remain small. However, the FAMC has started focussing upon their growth potential by discussing with them what is needed for their growth.

The income for City Services is actually only coming at present from a handful of units. So maybe we should focus on helping these units who have a much bigger turnover to grow into very big companies, for we will need five or ten of these to get the needed income for ‘Prosperity’. However, it might be good to disconnect these units in some way from the existing Auroville economy because their needs will be so different, and let them be run by professional management. I think that’s the only solution.

Meanwhile, we are experimenting with the beginnings of a ‘Prosperity’ system. We are trying to put PTDC, PTPS and HERS together under one umbrella. The plan is for a basic basket of goods to be available in all these outlets, (PTPS and HERS can still be commercial to some extent to cater to guests and volunteers) and these will be purchased from wholesalers through a central procurement system. Together with a plan to link all the major buyers, outlets, restaurants, bakeries etc. with a data system keeping track of buying needs, combined with a

professional service to procure the best products at the best cost, we would be able to get our basic needs covered in the most economical way: for providing the basic needs of all could be the first part of Prosperity.

But all this can only happen on a centralised basis.

This has been talked about before, but it never materialised.

Yes, things like a common procurement service have always failed because some of the key people didn’t want it. So, once again, we are faced with the same question: are people willing to give up some of their freedom for a collective discipline which would benefit the community as a whole?

The personal dimension

What about the impact upon you personally of being involved in this FAMC work? Given the task you set out to achieve and the criticisms it has attracted, it cannot have been easy.

It hasn’t been easy at all. The way we communicate with each other is often very violent and uncomfortable. I’m a person who doesn’t like confrontation and I don’t like being rude to people. But if people have broken the values of Auroville, I can be quite tough. I wrote an article just before this FAMC started when I said the alternative at that time to Auroville clearing up its own mess was for it to be put into administration, meaning that an outside administrator would take over to ensure that all of Auroville was fully compliant with laws and regulations and all its liabilities were settled. I only went into the FAMC to avoid this possibility, for if we don’t do something now, the remedial action may become even more blunt.

But I wonder to what extent you have felt personally conflicted. Your interest in Buddhism, for example, or your experience as a wood-worker who prizes organic design, suggest that you don’t necessarily favour top-down imposition. Also, your comment in an earlier interview that “The logical mind creates a simplified version of the world, which helps us to survive and navigate, but it becomes a hindrance when we want to grasp the larger picture”, suggests that you also see limitations to rational action.

I agree that it is something of a paradox to ask somebody like me to put something in order, because my feeling is that nature as such is not rational. Basically, human consciousness is just a huge machine to find patterns in everything, but nature is not formed by patterns. This is simply something that we impose upon it: this is our ‘reality’. Modern physics confirms that at a certain level the structure of the universe is chaotic, and you cannot predict anything. And this is probably what creates freedom and evolution, because if the universe was totally predictable, everything would be a machine.

But there’s another side to it. While I don’t believe in an Almighty God as such, that doesn’t mean that I don’t believe in something divine, because there seems to be a trend in the evolution of the universe to create beautiful complexity. According to the laws of physics, this universe should actually have been a mess, to have progressed to higher and higher states of chaos, of entropy. But ‘something’ has chosen to counter this, to create beautiful complexity out of chaos. And human evolution is an important part of this.

From an interview by Alan

The Governing Board on the Auroville Economy

Views of the Governing Board on the Auroville economy as mentioned in the minutes of the 57th Governing Board Meeting held in December 2021.

The Board noted the following in relation to the present status of the economy of Auroville:

- 1) The Mother had envisaged Auroville as a self-supporting township. Auroville is not yet self-supporting and is unable to meet the basic needs of all residents of Auroville.
- 2 It is not clear how many adult Aurovilians are contributing through work towards the realisation of the aims and objectives of Auroville.
- 3) Auroville’s cost of living seems to be high.
- 4) Auroville is still a monetary transactional society.
- 5) There is no pan-Auroville annual budget.
- 6) There is no medium and long-term economy plan.
- 7) Human resources are not evaluated for their contribution to Auroville after the completion of the newcomer period.
- 8) There is a large number of trusts and units with multiple GST registrations and accounting systems.

The Board is of the view that the following action needs to be taken in relation to the economy of Auroville:

- 1) Preparation of an annual Auroville budget that includes all resources and all needs.
- 2) Preparation of a medium and long-term economy plan including financial plans of the income-generating units of Auroville.
- 3) Make capital available for the growth of existing income-generating units and start-up capital for new income-generating units.
- 4) Establish an innovation and incubation centre for the youth to be actively engaged.
- 5) Strengthen and support the knowledge economy.
- 6) All Auroville lands, buildings and other assets must be utilized to generate collective resources for Auroville as whole.
- 7) Use some of the outlying lands of Auroville for income generation through joint ventures or ventures in which Auroville has a passive stake.

- 8) Elimination of internal money exchange.
- 9) Ensure that all basic needs of all residents are met and that all residents contribute to the realisation of Auroville.
- 10) Enhance Auroville food production to meet the needs of Auroville.
- 11) Simplify the governance and organisation structures (trusts, units, activities and committees).
- 12) Integrated common accounting systems to be implemented for more effective and transparent financial management.
- 13) Contributions by income-generating units to be reviewed (rationale of the 33% contribution; utilisation of surpluses).
- 14) Reduce construction costs with innovative construction practices and effective and transparent price discovery mechanisms.
- 15) The Mother envisaged Auroville as a self-supporting township. All Auroville residents are expected to contribute to achieving this goal and work for the collective welfare of Auroville.

A third way of development?

We are used to saying that Auroville does not fit neatly into any known category. But this doesn't stop many of us having certain fixed ideas about how it should develop. For example, some think that to build a city we need to have carefully worked out plans beforehand. And they conclude that the closer we get to realising these plans in detail, the more successful we are in developing Auroville.

But what if we are wrong? Mother certainly seemed to be indicating a very different path when it came to development. For example, in a brochure for the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre in 1953 she wrote:

Generally speaking there are no cut and dried plans for the future. As has been the case in all the growth of the Ashram, things will be allowed to develop naturally and freely without subjecting them to any preconceived plan. The guidance is always there and at each stage for the growth of the movement what is best for its fullest development will be known and acted upon accordingly.

The nature of that 'guidance' in regard to the Ashram was explained by Sri Aurobindo:

There has never been, at any time, a mental plan, a fixed programme or an organisation decided beforehand. The whole thing has taken birth, grown and developed as a living being by a movement of consciousness (Chit-tapas) constantly maintained, increased and fortified.

And in *Mother's Agenda* in 1969 Mother confirmed that this approach continued even after his passing:

The consciousness consciously recreates, so to speak, continues its creation....It's the consciousness constantly at work, not as a sequel of what was there before, but as a result of what it perceives every instant. In the mental movement, there is the consequence of what you've done before – it's not that, it's the consciousness which CONSTANTLY sees what has to be done. It's extremely important to understand that, because that's how it's still working – for everything. It's not at all a "formation" whose development you must look after: it's the consciousness which, every second, follows – follows its own movement. That allows everything!

It's precisely what allows miracles, reversals, and so on – it allows everything. It's the very opposite of human creations.

This is why, as she explained to Satprem in 1966, she had always resisted a mentalised approach to doing things.

My whole effort is to live from minute to minute. I mean, to do every minute exactly what should be done, without making plans, without thinking, without ... because it all becomes mental; as soon as you start thinking something out, that's no longer it.

And she further explained:

What I mean is that usually (always so far, and more and more so), men establish mental rules according to their conceptions and their ideal, then they apply them (Mother lowers her fist, as if to show the world under the mental grip). And that's absolutely false, arbitrary, unreal, so the result is that things revolt, or else waste away and disappear.... It's the experience of LIFE ITSELF that must slowly work out rules AS SUPPLE AND VAST as possible, in order that they ever remain progressive. Nothing must be fixed.

All this explains a great deal about how she dealt with Auroville. For example, for many years she did not want any rules to be laid down for the residents because:

Things will get formulated as the underlying Truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate.

It is why she was so concerned that her words should not be fossilised:

You will say one day, 'Mother has said this, Mother has said that'...and that is how dogmas, alas, are made.

This is also why she was extremely flexible, willing to change, for example, the orientation of the zones and even the site of the future Matrimandir when land was not immediately available. And it was why she allowed people like Yvonne Artaud and Roger Anger to continue with their experiments, unrestrained by any interventions from her. (However, she was not completely 'hands off' when it came to Auroville. "I am trying to give the general orientation and trying to prevent things from taking the wrong turn", she told one of her secretaries.)

In other words, it is as if she was providing the Aurovilians with a basic framework – the land, the Charter and some general guidance – and then allowing them the freedom to find their own way under the constant pressure of a higher force for change.

All this raises a fascinating question. Did Mother know what the final form of Auroville would be? One of her statements could suggest this. In June, 1968, Rijuta, one of her secretaries, noted that Mother had told her:

Auroville is still suspended above and they are trying to pull it

down. It will take time. They try to do things by a mental construction. It doesn't work.

But even if she knew it was 'suspended above', it doesn't necessarily mean that she knew all the details of how it would be (Mother often said, particularly in her final years, that certain kinds of foreknowledge were prohibited to her). It could also mean that while the 'idea' of Auroville already existed above, rather like one of Plato's ideal 'Forms', it still had to be translated into worldly terms.

In any event, in spite of her comments about the 'falsity' of mental conceptions, it was not long before mentalised conceptions of how Auroville should develop surfaced. As early as 1970 in a letter to Suresh and Harish Hindocha, Dr. Sidney I. Firstman (Department Manager in the Aerospace Corporation, California, U.S.A., whom Roger and others hoped would do a sequential planning of construction for Auroville) wrote "I feel that at least some in Auroville have been too much concerned with determining the complete nature and physical form of Auroville."

In this context, a very interesting meeting took place of the newly formed Planning Group in October, 1971. According to Ruud Lohman's notes, Roger presented what he thought were the only two ways in which the township could develop. One way was:

...no designs, no plans, no committees. Just let it happen, give it a chance and all the time it needs, and we'll see what comes out of it. For, after all, it is a spiritual and evolutionary experiment in which unknown forces play a role and it will happen anyhow, with us or without us. The second possibility is to decide how Auroville is to be built, in which case we can do nothing but project a model and keep on evaluating and correcting it. We have to remain supple, yet work from a preconceived base. He said he did not see a third solution, but he invited the group to come up with one, for he would be happy to consider it.

In fact, for many years Roger favoured a people-centred approach. For example, in 1972 he said in a video interview with Michel Klosterman:

This city will not be constructed first and then occupied but it will be the inhabitants who will define by their living experience the needs of the city.

And twenty years later, in an interview in Auroville Today, he reiterated:

The city is still to be invented, everything still has to be done through the daily experience and rhythm of the Aurovilians. Apart from these Lines of Force, everything is flexible, nothing is fixed.

However, just four years later, seemingly frustrated by the slow development of the city, his tone and attitude had changed. He told Aryamani and Luigi that:

The main thing is that you have forgotten that we all came here to build a city. We didn't come here to do any regional development. That's all. You have forgotten. That's all. Or maybe you were never aware of it. And paradoxically I had somehow forgotten some of it because I was drowned in discussions, in confrontations, in political adjustments, in fears, in dreads. We don't even have courage anymore to impose our vision.

And in 2006, in a letter to Dr. Karan Singh, chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, Roger wrote:

For the township to be built within a time frame in accordance with the concept approved by the Mother and the already approved master plan, a team of people needs to be formed who have the mandate to make the Auroville Township a reality.

For an effective realisation of the township, I suggest therefore that the Governing Board appoints a special body which may be called the Auroville Township Development Council and that this body is fully empowered to plan, develop and build the township under my overall supervision and guidance.

In other words, the crux of the present crisis regarding Auroville's city development seems to be embodied in the clash between what Roger was expressing in 1973, *What is important is not building a city but building new men*, and what he expressed many years later: *She didn't ask us to do the integral yoga; it is not true. She told us 'Come and build a city'.*

In that 1971 meeting at which Roger described what he saw as two possible approaches to city development, he invited the new Planning Group to come up with a third alternative, something which would bridge these two approaches, which he said he would welcome. But what would that third alternative look like, and could it offer a way forward?

Dr. Firstman had already articulated one possibility in his 1970 letter to the Hindochas. Firstman was a practical man, which is why he wrote that:

Though it is to evolve, I think that the planning of Auroville should not be left to chances or to loose discussions. It must be made a matter of purposeful thought and purposeful expression...

However, at the same time, he was very aware of the danger of a finished concept being imposed upon the community, which is why he also wrote:

Auroville should not be planned all at once. It should be allowed to evolve, expressing the people...Auroville should not be planned nor should it be scheduled, at least not beyond the next step objectives as seen at that time....

Therefore, his proposal was that, instead of preparing and following a town plan or master plan for development:

...we establish an adaptive development strategy. The basic elements of this adaptive development strategy are that annually, at least, and semi-annually if possible, a committee of Aurovilians carry out a planning and re-planning activity. This would involve evaluating or re-evaluating goals, assessing the current status of where Auroville was with respect to its goals, and then planning the next objectives for the next five years.

Today, the *Auroville Universal Township Master Plan (Perspective 2025)* seems to echo this approach to development in emphasising the need for the regular assessment of goals through five year reviews, as well as the need for flexibility and participatory planning. As the document puts it:

Although the Master Plan perspective 2025 provides a time horizon of 25 years, it will neither be traditional nor static and rigid. [...] The present momentum in Development and Environmental activities will be strengthened through a participatory Environmental Management process which will be integrated within all development, planning and urban design elements.

However, little or none of this has actually happened: there have been no five year Detailed Development Plans, no Annual Plans, no reviews, and no participatory Environmental Processes. There may be many reasons for this (and Raag Yadava's excellent recent analysis of governance in Auroville identifies many of them). But one of them seems to be that some of the planners have been concerned that inviting genuine participatory planning would slow down the city building process and/or 'dilute' the original concept which some people hold (in spite of Roger's insistence in 1992 that almost everything in it is flexible) as in some way being sacred. They seem to think the Auroville which Mother said already exists 'above' must conform to the original Galaxy model in most or all its details as Mother had 'blessed' it. But this ignores a number of things. Firstly, that Mother's blessings are not a guarantee of success or an indication that she 'approves' of something. As she put it:

My blessings are very dangerous. They cannot be for this one or for that one or against this person or against that thing. It is for... or, well, I will put it in a mystic way: It is for the Will of the Lord to be done, with full force and power. So it is not necessary that there should always be a success. There might be a failure also, if such is the Will of the Lord. And the Will is for the progress, I mean the inner progress. So whatever will happen will be for the best.

Secondly, that Roger changed a number of things in the original Galaxy plan while Mother was in her body, presumably with her approval and, thirdly, her statements about the need not to fossilise prematurely the development of the future town, for the 'truth' of it would take time to emerge. (Regarding details, the only detailed descriptions that Mother ever gave of constructions in the city were of her original conception of the Matrimandir – which later changed completely – and, later, of the inner chamber.)

Could, then, Firstman's 'adaptive development' be the 'third' way of approaching development which Roger was inviting the 1971 planning group to discover, or at least one aspect of it, for this third way would also need to include how Sri Aurobindo and Mother experienced and practiced development, as a response to a 'movement of consciousness'.

But how to contact, to make oneself available, to that consciousness? Sri Aurobindo wrote:

It goes without saying that the more the instrument is open, receptive and plastic, the better are the results. The two obstacles that stand in the way of a smooth and harmonious working in and through the sadhaks (of the conscious force) are: (1) the preconceived ideas and mental constructions which block the way to the influence and the working of the conscious force; (2) the preferences and impulses of the vital which distort and falsify the expression.

Mother described a similar process to Satprem in 1962:

Don't decide anything mentally. You must learn to be immobile, silent, and let the Lord speak through you; it's much better than deciding in advance, much better... The less one explains, the less one plans, the better, always, always.

Do we have the courage to step into this new adventure? For, while it would not preclude other approaches, at some stage in the planning process it would mean abandoning all our preconceptions of how Auroville should develop to allow us to become available to something else. To the revelation of the 'Now', of the constantly evolving Truth:

"the consciousness which, every second, follows – follows its own movement."

Alan

An opportunity to grow

My Journey with Auroville International USA

I first visited Auroville in 2000 as a student in the *Living Routes* programme. After I came home, Auroville lived inside me. I dreamed about it and imagined myself there, but I didn't go back for 13 years. In 2013 I had a sudden inner calling, an immediate need to be there and touch the earth, eat the food, drink the water, and breathe the air. I saw The Mother's face and felt her presence calling me.

When I came home from that trip, it was like a seed that had been lying dormant inside me woke up. I needed to be connected to Auroville. I tracked down Julian Lines and spent several months trying to figure out what AVI USA was and how to get involved. I eventually had a phone meeting with Bryan Walton, who was President of the board at the time, and he invited me to join. I still didn't really know what AVI USA was, but it was connected to Auroville and that's all that mattered to me.

When I joined the board, I was the youngest by a decade and the next youngest was called "Baby Binah". If she was a baby then what was I? This was before Zoom, and I sat on the phone month after month listening to Jack Alexander and Jeanne Korstange telling stories about Auroville in the 1970s, a place I had never known, feeling like I was crashing someone else's family reunion. I had no reason to continue. I didn't even want to. But I did, year after year.

The older board members welcomed my inputs, but it was a challenge to get traction on any specific projects. I led a strategic planning process that resulted in some committees being formed to work on specific projects, but the projects fizzled out and the committees got discouraged. We were all volunteers with other jobs, family obligations, and limited time to give. We had big aspirations, but no one had the time to really follow through, myself included. It was frustrating.

In 2019, the person who had been board President decided to step down. Everyone kind of looked around, and I was the only one who had never held the role. Someone asked me if I would take it, and I said 'no'. It didn't make sense to me to sign my name and take responsibility for something that I wasn't really engaged with. I had hoped that by joining the board I would be able to contribute something meaningful to Auroville, but I wasn't doing that and I didn't see that changing. I decided at that moment to quit the board.

I don't remember how the conversation flowed. What I know is that as soon as I decided to quit, I was embraced by a presence that was full of light and hope. It was like The Mother was saying "No, it's not time for you to go. Take the role and don't worry." Somehow by the end of the meeting I had assented and the board voted and I was the President. Now I had no one else to blame for my frustration and lack of direction, but I also didn't know what to do to solve it.

An opportunity to grow

A year later, as COVID was spreading around the world and many people were locked inside their houses, someone who had never donated to AVI USA before contacted us and made a proposal. This is not usually the way it goes - usually the organisation proposes something to the donor. The donor then considers whether to invest in the idea. In this case, it was the other way around. The donor had the idea and we had to decide whether to take it up.

This donor proposed to financially invest in the improvement of AVI USA's infrastructure so the organisation could raise and send more funds to Auroville. Their ultimate vision was to help the accumulated gifts, beauty and wisdom of Auroville, infused with Mother's spiritual grace, to flow out into the broader world. They wanted to light a spark, build a container, and see if it could grow into an engine.

At the time, my wife Corinne and I were facing the closing of our yoga studio because of COVID and trying to decide what to do next. It was a synchronistic moment. I had a decade of experience in non-profit leadership, a profound love for Auroville and commitment to serving the Mother, and I needed a job.

This yoga does not have a clear path. In a way, each of us is our own path. When we find our path, we find ourselves. And this finding is often a nonlinear affair, full of unexpected plot twists and surprises.

I didn't want to run a nonprofit. I knew how much work it would be and I wanted to pursue music and write a book. But I couldn't walk away from the chance to serve The Mother and Auroville. Binah felt the same mix of reluctance and adventure. We decided to take on the challenge.

We soon realised that one of the biggest challenges would be threading the needle between three completely independent and sometimes mutually contradictory bureaucracies: the one governing US non profit organisations, the one governing foreign funds received in India, and the one governing Auroville. And we also had to manage the expectations and aspirations of the donor, the AVI USA board, and Aurovilians. It was a dance...that sometimes required juggling while dancing...and sometimes we had to continue dancing and juggling through a hailstorm or an earthquake.

Digging In

In 2020, India's COVID lockdowns were in the news, and we understood from the Auroville Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) that the economy was facing challenges. We started by developing a fundraising system that could accept donations from around the world and keep track of donor info. It sounds simple, but this was a lot of work - researching software products, consolidating all of AVI USA's disparate contact lists, integrating the donor database with the fundraising platform and the email platform, writing monthly newsletters, and revamping the website.

Between March of 2020, when COVID first emerged, and the end of 2021, we sent over \$770,000 to Auroville. We worked closely with the BCC and project leaders to understand the needs and direct the funds accordingly. And we collaborated on the creation of MERA - Management of Emergency Response in



The Board of Auroville International USA. From left: Bill Leon – Secretary, Julian Lines, Matthew Andrews – President, Maggie Greer, Binah Thillairajah – Vice President, Jack Alexander and Mary Alexander – Treasurer. Not in photo: Flavia Montenegro and Judi Checo. Photo taken at the 2023 Face to Face Annual Board meeting in Cape Cod, MA.

Auroville - which distributed over \$100,000 to Auroville units specifically for covering the payroll for workers during COVID. This had an impact on Auroville projects, but also on the local workers who depend on their jobs to feed their families.

In December of 2021, a conflict that had been simmering in Auroville for decades erupted. *Auroville Today* has done a good job of covering the conflict's various iterations, dimensions and implications, personal and collective, so I won't repeat them here. All AVI USA board members, myself included, were personally shaken by the emergence of this conflict and the subsequent polarisation and enmity that emerged in the community.

There was a lot of anger, resentment, mistrust, and judgment in the air, and in the midst of this we decided to anchor ourselves in love and respect. This didn't always make it clear what to do or how to respond to any given situation, but it was a guiding principle that we've held to, and it has defined our work.

Focus on the projects

At some point, our lawyers found an amendment that had been made to AVI USA's founding documents in the 1970s. It changed the language of the organisation's purpose from "to support the Auroville project in India" to "to support projects in Auroville in India". None of us on the board were aware of this amendment, and though subtle it is also quite clear. It surfaced just as we were seeing success in helping projects develop their fundraising capacity. So it underscored the sense that focusing on supporting the projects was the way to go.

For the past few years we have held a Matching Donation Campaign during December. We work all year to collect a pool of matching funds, and then use them to double every donation that we receive for an Auroville project in December. Last year we raised over \$210k for projects during the campaign, and motivated hundreds of donors to support the projects they love.

Ioana joined our small team in 2022, after a short period of volunteering. She focuses on connecting projects with our fundraising tools and providing them with the latest technology to support their fundraising efforts. She coaches them in using our platforms and is generally available 24/7 to answer our Auroville partners' questions. She is the editor of our eConnect newsletter, always seeking news and updates to help connect donors and supporters to what is most relevant and valuable in Auroville. She gave a new face to our 2023 Matching Campaign, helping both AVI USA and Auroville projects almost double our Matching Campaign fundraising effort from the previous year.

Binah focusses on donor development. She loves people and her warmth and ability to listen have guided her relationship-building work. She also networks and develops partnerships with other funders, like Rotary International, which just approved a grant for EcoFemme for \$36,000, and the India Development and Relief Fund, which doubles donations channeled through AVI USA to select projects that align with their interest areas.

We could measure our progress in dollars sent to Auroville, but I am also always looking for feedback from the projects themselves. If we're actually helping them, it should be obvious to them. I recently asked Kathy from EcoFemme how AVI USA has impacted their work over the past few years. She responded that we are their "go-to allies and advisors in our fundraising work. Matthew has been especially helpful as a dialogue partner to talk things over and help hone certain pitch elements for grant applications we have been working on. He has also set up impactful sessions which provided sound advice on how to build and nurture ongoing relationships with donors. I feel incredibly grateful to the competent AVI USA team and really well supported."

Angelika from Deepam School stressed how important it is to get feedback and encouragement from someone who knows Auroville well, but has some distance from the day-to-day reality.

"Especially in the present situation where things are so uncertain and we don't know what new challenges tomorrow will bring, AVI USA's reliable support and professional feedback means a lot to us. I can sense their love and deep connection for Auroville, and, aside from getting new contacts with donors that I wouldn't have met on my own, I always get new ideas and inspirations when we talk."

And Sriraman from Yuvabe wrote that "Over the past two years, AVI USA has mentored our team and provided crucial support across the fundraising process. From sharing practical ideas to planning and strategizing for campaigns, the personal touch and innovative thinking have been instrumental in our growth and success. We deeply appreciate their unwavering support and mentorship."

In addition to supporting projects, we also support our donors. Most donors don't have the capacity to vet and monitor the projects they donate to. AVI USA assumes responsibility for the proper use of funds and the achievement of intended impacts. We vet projects, collect reports and budgets, and conduct site visits. Binah has been specifically speaking to donors who want to leave a donation to Auroville in their will or estate plan. She helps them ensure their legal documents are set up so we can carry out their wishes after they've departed from this world.

Multiplying impact

Between 2020 and 2023, AVI USA sent three times as much money to Auroville as we did between 2016 and 2019. We've been able to do this because of the creative and forward thinking invitation that one donor offered us. This donor continues to support a large portion of our operational budget, and has recently been joined by others who have felt similarly inspired to invest in Auroville. We see these investments as multipliers - whatever someone contributes, we're committed to multiplying the output and the positive impact on projects in Auroville.

On a personal level, I have tended to compartmentalise my spiritual practice and inner life from my outer work. I take seriously Sri Aurobindo's encouragement to draw all of life into one yoga, leaving nothing apart. Working for Auroville has been an incredible gift in this sense. When I step back and reflect on it, it's hard to believe that I've been given such an amazing opportunity to unite my heart, my mind, and my hands. And I try to live up to the opportunity by approaching the work with sincerity, integrity, and faith in the Divine.

AVI USA board members don't all agree with each other all the time. But we are committed to respect, to care for each other, to honesty, and integrity. We strive to do what we feel is in alignment with the spirit of Auroville. And we remain focused on supporting the projects and their work to channel this spirit into material life.

Auroville is a unique and beautiful experiment. It's a daring aspiration that rejects the cynicism and hopelessness that pervade our modern discourse. Its very existence is a victory for light and truth. All the decisions we make and all the actions we take are rooted in our belief in Auroville's inherent value and our intention to nourish its future.

Would you like to join our efforts? It doesn't matter where in the world you live or what your background or skill set might be - we are always looking for opportunities to collaborate with people who love Auroville. Please reach out at info@aviusa.org.

Matthew Andrews

The Auroville creche

It is 10 am and I hear the joyful pitter-patter of toddlers running for their snacks. I am not at Summer Camp, but it feels like I'm on holiday, nevertheless. I am at the Auroville crèche and tea is ready to be served.

About 24 toddlers, from the ages of nine months to three years, are enjoying juice and biscuits. Tea is for teachers only. And me. We have just finished setting up clay and decoration tools to start another session of imprints of hands and feet. We have done this already twice and the finished tiles were presented to the families at last year's Christmas celebration. Now we want to continue this tradition with a new batch, which will be 20 babies and attending parents.

Our thanks to Mandala Pottery, where the pieces are fired.

A bit of history: Auroville has a range of schools, from kindergarten to primary and secondary schools. What was missing was a place where like-minded parents could meet and be with their small children, even babies. In the beginning of the new millennium some Aurovilians found a space in the Greenbelt, on the road to Dana, and they initiated the pre- crèche. It was just a place to meet, with a shed and a small kitchen.

Parents would come with their babies and were asked to become involved, stay for some hours, and only leave when the child was accustomed to being without them.

The kids set the pace. Mornings were spent with playing, singing and walks in the forest, even outings to the Botanical Garden in Pondy.

Around 2013, the crèche moved to its recent place near Deepanam School, after about five years of planning and administrative hurdles. Dr Karan Singh was invited to the inauguration and lit the candles. Now it has a big garden with a playground, three classrooms and a kitchen and office surround a pleasant courtyard.

Apart from daily activities, there are annual celebrations, like the Christmas Party with Santa Claus and presents, and Ganesh Pooja. What is missing is a pool, as water games are in high demand and until now only buckets and garden hoses can be used.



Hand-printed clay tablets

The crèche is a project under SAIER. The late Sanjeev Aggarwal was very supportive and often visited the premises. He initiated the publication of the book *Taking Care of Preschool Children –The Mother's Vision and the Auroville Experience*, featuring the three main places children can join before school: the pre-crèche and the crèche groups of Kindergarten and Nandanam. The book explains in detail the approach of Auroville's crèches in terms of Mother's teachings.

The driving force to implement these values was Marie-Angel, accompanied by Usha P. and Anjalai who joined in 2005, plus many volunteers. Later, Auroprem started to help with the administration. Sometime later, Marie-Angel stopped, and Usha moved to Australia. Now Anjalai is the seniormost teacher with the longest experience. Being a mother of two gives her valuable tools to educate children and give good advice to parents.

When COVID hit and everything went into lockdown, naturally the crèche closed its gates. After some relaxation, teachers met with the children in smaller groups, mostly outdoors and while maintaining reasonable distances. This was not easy with babies!

In general, the work at the crèche is challenging. Daily there is a high energy level and the teachers have to be on high alert to watch the babies and toddlers. But it is very rewarding for both sides. As teachers spend quite a lot of time with the kids, sometimes they notice some problems in the behaviour, like difficulties in hearing, talking or moving. Then they can point this out to the parents, who can take appropriate action.

To have your child admitted to the crèche, one isn't asked for a financial contribution, but donations are welcome. Since the new administration and the reorganisation of many Auroville services or units, SAIER also cut teachers' maintenances here...



Juliette shows the children how to imprint clay tablets

What has also changed is the access to Matrimandir Gardens. There was a gate which could be used to enter the Gardens directly from the crèche's premises, but due to extensive building activities at Matrimandir, this access is not accessible anymore.

If you are in Auroville, try to make an appointment to visit the crèche, and to give some hours of your time to volunteer in whatever capacity you can contribute. I for one, even if I don't have children of my own, am grateful that there is a place like this and I will continue to put little hands and feet into clay. Even if sometimes there are some tears.

Juliette Kühle

REFLECTIONS

An impossible task

I stopped advertising and promoting the teaching of yoga a long time ago. It's kind of a bitter irony, truly. Knowing something to be so precious, wonderful, excellent and full of meaning, yet extolling an impossible cost. The life into which we are born, life of tradition and convention, life of certain security by perpetuating old habits, gives us some sort of security and stability. It might be terrible, it might be killing us in dozens, it might be destroying our lives, bringing them to an untimely demise, yet there is some sort of reassurance that that is the way things are done here. We've done it since our early age, we saw it in our parents, we see it in our neighbours and peers, and we either blame or glorify it, but we keep holding on to it.

And then we keep continuously looking for improvements of that unholy thing we call "our life". We want a bigger living space, more days off from work, a softer sofa, obedient children, a faithful spouse, peace of mind and less stress. We are looking for upgrades, modifications and improvements in any way to "what is". If we are not doing it, then life loses any meaning, and we quickly spiral down into decay and oblivion.

Yet recent worldwide events touched our lives in very harsh and unexpected ways. We've been dislocated, thrown out of our habitual groove of life. Our values, continuity of hope has been dashed aside and try as much as we could, we would never gain our hoped and desired state of peace, comfort and security. Entire nations got dislocated in their way of life and way of thinking.

Yet we keep trying to achieve our status quo, the unholiness and misery of our initial existence by any cost.... and we fail, and we try again, only to fail again. The action that does not bring the desired result which is repeated again and again is called neuroticism. And if we do not possess a significant elasticity in our identity, we are bound to get stuck in this neurotic loop of unfruitful behaviour until we change the way we perceive ourselves and the reality inside and outside of us.

Such change of our life outlook with healthy, sane, and positive change requires a tremendous amount of energy, clarity of mind and stability of consciousness. A willful and unconscious effort in remodeling our entire being, leaving nothing untouched, scrupulously examining each existing and non-existing thing in ourselves, leaving harmonious and beneficial things, discarding ugliness and imaginary things, is nothing but a process of yoga.

We've been given an amazing chance of change and new discovery, the grace of breaking out of the vicious circle of our original faulty pattern, and yet the cost of the success is our life in its entirety. Nothing can remain "too sacred" and escape the change, nothing in us is protected from scrutiny and test by facing the Reality.

We either change or fade into the past, either adapt and discover new life or refuse and are crushed by the grinding wheels of circumstance. It is up to us to summon the courage and needed energy for the change.

Aum

Krishna

Krishna lived in Auroville. Currently he resides and works in South Korea. He has created a Russian website focused on Integral Self-Development and established "Auro e-Books," a dedicated website for publishing ebooks on Integral Yoga and the community of Auroville. His personal blogs can be read at <https://vladnesh.wordpress.com/>

The pressure cooker

A children's tale



CARTOON: CHARUDUTTA

In the magical city of Auroville, there lived a boy named Surya. He loved his home, with its lush forests, colourful buildings, and friendly people from all over the world. But lately, things weren't quite right in Auroville.

Surya's parents seemed worried all the time. They whispered about "changes" and "new rules" that didn't make sense. Even Surya's teacher at school looked stressed.

One day, Surya's mom was cooking dal in their old pressure cooker. The cooker hissed and whistled, steam escaping from its valve.

"That's what Auroville feels like right now," Surya's mom sighed. "Like we're all stuck in a big pressure cooker!"

Surya giggled at the silly image. "But Mom, pressure cookers make yummy food!"

His mom smiled. "You're right, sweetheart. Sometimes pressure can create good things too."

That night, Surya dreamed he was inside a giant pressure cooker with all his Aurovilian friends. They were getting squeezed tighter and tighter!

"What do we do?" cried his best friend Priya.

Surya remembered his mom's words. "Maybe we can use this pressure to make something good!"

So the children joined hands and started to sing. As their voices grew louder, the pressure cooker began to glow. Suddenly, it burst open, and a rainbow of light spilled out across Auroville.

The next morning, Surya told his parents about his dream.

"You know," said his dad thoughtfully, "maybe this difficult time is like that pressure cooker. It's uncomfortable, but it's pushing us to grow and change in new ways."

Over the next weeks, Surya noticed something interesting. People were talking more, coming up with creative ideas to solve problems. His teacher started a new project about Auroville's history. His parents' friends, who sometimes bickered over details, started to agree on what really matters and voiced it loud and strong. Even Surya felt braver about sharing his thoughts.

One evening, as the family sat on their rooftop watching the sunset over Matrimandir, Surya's mom hugged him close.

"Surya," she said, "no matter what changes come, remember that Auroville's spirit is in our hearts. Like your dream showed us, when we work together with love, we can turn pressure into light."

Surya nodded, feeling hopeful. He knew that just like his mom's delicious dal, sometimes the best things come from a little time in the pressure cooker.

The End.

Maël

Maël was born in Auroville in 1994, and grew up between Auroville and France. An anthropologist, poet and massage-therapist, Maël is also a member of the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly since 2022. He now temporarily stays in France, due to ongoing visa issues.

The Secret Soul

An art exhibition by Hufreesh Dumasia at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture

Hufreesh has had many exhibitions of her work in Auroville, but perhaps this is the most evocative so far. The paintings, in their swirling lines and simple colours, seem to strip away surface inessentials to reveal something deeper, something more inwardly 'vibratory' than the simply pictorial.

She explains that what has always motivated her is "the deepest existential question that every human asks at some stage in their life, 'Who am I?' My art is that discovery process." As this inner process of discovery developed, she says, so did her art. The inspiration for the latest exhibition came from a breathwork workshop she had attended.

"Holotropic breathing [a rapid breathing technique to attain other states of

consciousness, eds.] brings up a lot of things, and during this I had a glimpse of my soul. So I wanted to express the sense of it in these works."

Hufreesh does not pre-plan her paintings. "I feel this is something that is created through me, I'm just the instrument, because if I was to work with a mental concept, I think it would turn out to be very banal, without depth. That's why when I start work I try to keep myself out of it as much as I can. The more I can do that, to allow the pure inspiration to go through me, the more the artwork gets better."

It also leads to her embracing new materials and techniques. The new exhibition includes two multimedia pieces featuring tree bark ("Seeing the destruction of trees recently really pained me a lot, and I wanted to express

that these trees are alive, they have a soul.") and a central installation, 'Inner reflections', involving suspended mirrors which constantly turn to reflect other facets of the room. "I'm now moving away from static artworks, I want them to be more interactive."

One piece in the exhibition is an exploration not so much of her as of another's inner being. 'Bindu', with its colourful concentric circles and golden centre, is Hufreesh's representation of an Aurovilian who recently passed away. "I felt very close to Bindu and experienced so much grief at her passing that I thought I would try to create something that represents her."

This is something she does with others, too. "I've learned a lot about healing energies over the years and I wanted to combine this with my art. So when people talk to me about

their dreams and aspirations and are open to the process, I tap into their energy field, and ask for a painting to come through me which is a representation of their inner self. I love doing this because each human being is so different that I find that in the process different styles and techniques emerge to capture their inner being."

It is why it is impossible to label her: each exhibition seems like a new form of artistic and personal exploration. "Most artists get labelled by their style and I don't want that, I have fought against that my entire life. I don't want to stick to a certain style because we have so much within us, so many different aspects that seek expression."

We look forward to seeing where her inner explorations take her next.

Alan



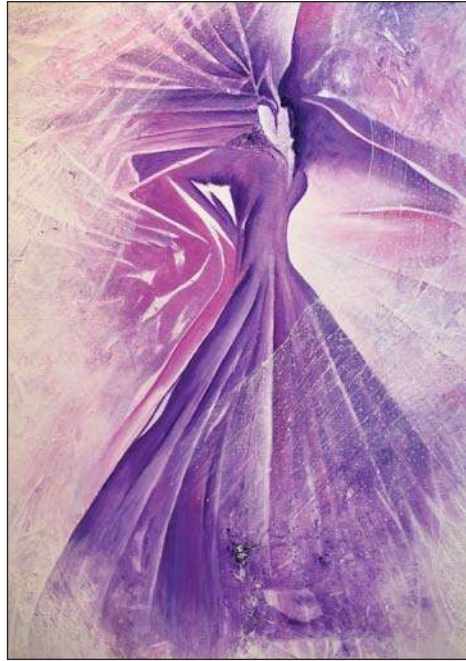
Hufreesh reflecting on her painting 'Bindu'



'Flower of ecstasy'



'The cosmic dreamer'



'Amethyst soul'



'Enchanted vision'

PASSINGS

Agia Ram Lamba



Agia Ram Lamba, the father of former Working Committee member Hemant Lamba, passed away in his house in Aurodam community on August 2nd. He was 87 years old.

Born in 1937 in undivided India, Agia Ram had experienced the painful partition of the country when, in 1947, he and his family left the city of Pindigheb in North West Punjab (now in Pakistan)

and, after an arduous journey, arrived in an Indian refugee camp. He then moved through several cities before he settled in New Delhi, and finally worked as an engineer and scientist at the Central Road Research Institute, New Delhi.

After his retirement he moved to Pondicherry and developed a deep connection with the Ashram and helped start the first Gurdwara in Pondicherry. He came to live in Auroville about ten years ago and worked at the Visitors Centre Guest Service, where his work and friendly nature was highly appreciated. He developed a special connection to the Matrimandir and guided people to get passes in search of Light, describing himself as "a guide to people in search of Light".

His body was cremated at the Auroville Cremation Ground on August 3rd.

Danielle de Diesbach



Her passion for the people she photographed and talked with led her to making documentaries, such as 'Conversations with Death', 'What you contribute to Auroville', 'What you will say to Newcomers', 'Diversity and Unity', and 'Women's Day', which are now all available on YouTube.

Danielle de Diesbach, a friend of Auroville who for more than 20 years has been coming to Auroville for six months a year, left her body on the night of August 18th in her home in the south of France. Danielle had made the Center Guesthouse her second home, each time leaving a few more bags for 'the next time'. In France she had been working as a photographer and in the fashion industry.

It was during one of her trips to Pondicherry that Danielle came across the Auroville Boutique. She asked to meet the designers who made the clothes. And that was how the Auroville virus took hold of her.

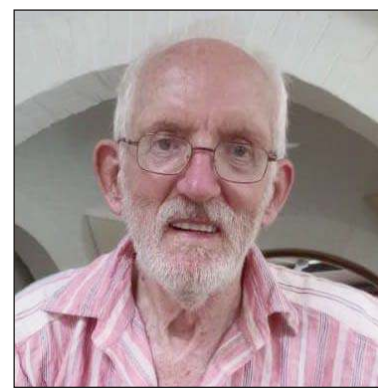
Kuppammal



Kuppammal, a long-time resident of the Grace Community, passed away on August 3rd. She had been living and working at the Grace Community for over 40 years along with her husband, Janarthanan. She was 62 years old.

Kuppammal's remains were cremated at Aprampet village the next day.

Yuval



Yuval (Govert Jan van den Eijk) left his body on August 25 at the age of 77, at the Mahalakshmi Home for the elderly, surrounded by members of his family.

Yuval came to Auroville from the Netherlands as a volunteer and joined Auroville in 2008. He lived in Utility and, lately, at the Mahalakshmi Home.

At heart, Yuval was first and foremost a pioneering adventurer. Born in the Netherlands, he embarked on his first adventure at the age of 19, when he left for Israel, later moving to Egypt, Copenhagen and Istanbul and finally coming to Auroville in 2004.

Yuval contributed to many projects around Auroville but was best known for his work in the field of Family Constellations, where his intuitive and humble way helped people reach deep realisations.

As Yuval struggled with Parkinson's disease in the last years, his optimism and positive outlook were an inspiration to others around him.

He was loved and respected by many and the outpouring of appreciation and love has been overwhelming.

Yuval's remains were buried at the Auroville burial grounds on August 29th.

Garden of Light opens

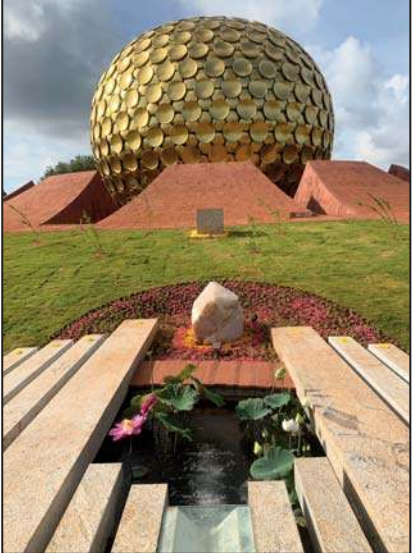
On Sri Aurobindo's birthday, August 15th, the Garden of Light, one of the twelve gardens of the Matrimandir, was declared open for all. The flower chosen for this garden by The Mother is the hibiscus named by Her “*Light of the purified Power*”, and her commentary on its significance is “*Of an irresistible simplicity in its power solely consecrated to the Divine*”.

The Garden of Light (4) comes after the yet to be completed Garden of Bliss (3). Together with this Garden, the Garden of Light faces the north pillar entrance of the Matrimandir, that of Mahakali. The Gardens of Existence (1) and Consciousness (2) have been completed. The fifth Garden, the Garden of Life, has also been completed. The sixth, the Garden of Power, is near to completion and the seventh, the Garden of Wealth, is in full construction mode. The only other completed Garden is the Garden of Progress, the ninth Garden. Work on the Gardens of Utility (8), Youth (10), Harmony (11) and Perfection (12) still has to be started.

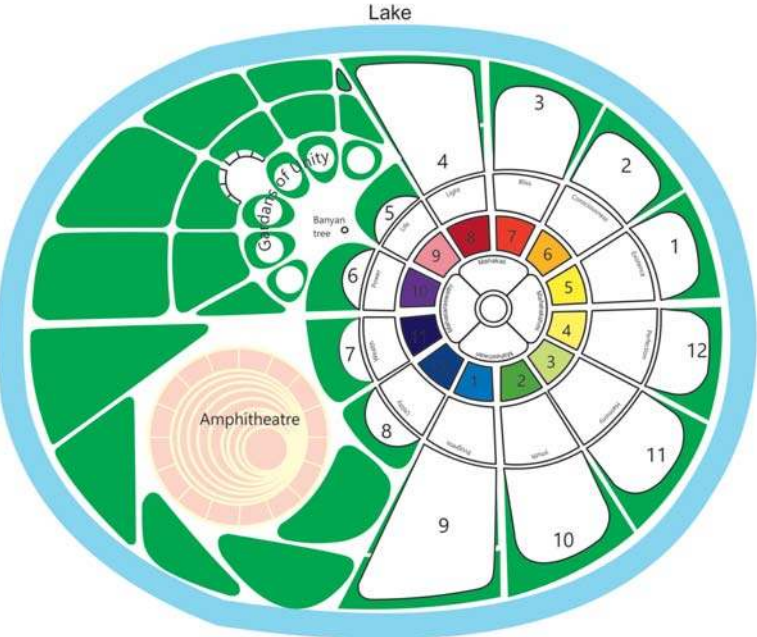
The Petal Meditation rooms are Sincerity (1), Humility (2), Gratitude (3), Perseverance (4), Aspiration (5), Receptivity (6), Progress (7), Courage (8), Goodness (9), Generosity (10), Equality (11) and Peace (12).



The Garden of Light with its marble clad ray-like stream, seen from the oval road



Lotus flowers and a quartz crystal are focal points of the Garden of Light



Layout of the Matrimandir oval



Night view of the Garden of Light



The Garden of Light seen from the Matrimandir. A series of large granite pillars cross the central water body

NEWS IN BRIEF

Slew of complaints referred to investigation agencies
The newspaper *The Hindu* reported on August 7th that the Minister of State for Education, Shri Sukanta Majumdar, replying in Parliament to a set of questions about Auroville, had said that the Central Government has referred a range of complaints, including dubious land exchanges, encroachment, cybercrime and money laundering in Auroville, to the appropriate bodies / agencies. Representations and complaints dealing with land exchanges have been forwarded to the Auroville Foundation to examine their merits and place them before the Governing Board, which is the competent authority to recommend a suitable course of action, the Minister said.

No news about new Secretary
No news has been communicated to the Auroville community about who will replace the former Secretary to the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Jayanti Ravi, whose term of office ended on July 4th, and who has been appointed Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Gujarat on July 31st, 2024.

Governing Board minutes
The minutes of the 67th meeting of the Governing Board held on May 31st have still not been published.

RA-WCOM objects to Auroville services reorganisation
The Working Committee appointed by the Residents' Assembly (RA-WCom) informed the community that it had written to the Governing Board objecting to the reorganisation of Auroville service structure without proper consultation. The RA-WCom objected to the recent appointment of single trustees to

Auroville Trusts, which violates Trust Deeds requiring at least two trustees; and to converting Auroville services (like Bluelight, the Road Service, the Health Fund etc.) into income-generating units under Trusts, as these are essential municipal services, not commercial entities. The RA-WCom reminded the Governing Board that according to the Auroville Foundation Act, only the Working Committee can create or close such entities, with Governing Board approval, and requested the Board that all actions to reconstitute trusts/trustees and reorganise services be halted and reversed immediately.

Rabies outbreak
The rescue team of the Auroville Dog Shelter caught inside Transition School a black female dog that acted extremely aggressively and displayed signs of a possible rabies infection. Five persons including two children, and many other dogs, were bitten by this dog. The rescue team used its stock of vaccinations to vaccinate the animal bite victims and caught two more dogs that showed symptoms of the rabies infection. All dogs caught were put in quarantine; two of them died soon afterwards, one is still under observation. The persons bitten were sent to a hospital for treatment.

The Auroville Dog Shelter Team warned that this might be the beginning of a serious rabies outbreak in Auroville and the surrounding villages. People were advised to not touch any dogs or puppies on the street and to keep their dogs and cats inside, and, if bitten, immediately get an anti-rabies vaccination as rabies symptoms may show up much later – in some cases up to a year later – but then are 100% fatal.

The Department of Animal Husbandry and the Animal Welfare Board of India, Tamil

Nadu officials and the Auroville Foundation have been informed and the Auroville Dog Shelter Team is working together with them to control and prevent a larger outbreak of rabies in Auroville and the surrounding area. The Auroville Foundation has been requested for funds to replenish the Dog's Shelters animal vaccination stock so that a potential large rabies outbreak can be fought successfully and Auroville be kept safe. Meanwhile, thanks to a donation from AVI USA, an emergency stock of animal vaccinations could be purchased. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends vaccinating at least 70% of dogs in at-risk areas to prevent rabies transmission and human deaths. This level of herd immunity needs to be maintained for 3–7 years to eliminate rabies. The Dog Shelter Team is going around Auroville to vaccinate as many dogs and cats as possible. Its mobile vet clinic in front of the Solar Kitchen has turned into a vaccination camp and all Aurovilians have been urged to have their dogs and cats vaccinated to eliminate the risk of rabies and keep everyone safe. A mass animal vaccination drive focussing on the Auroville surrounding villages started in the last week of August.

Accommodation for 1000 beds
The RA-WCom informed the community that the 100 crore loan request to the Indian Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) for the Governing Board's proposal to build 1,000 beds had not been approved by the Ministry of Education. The RA-WCom stated that the AVFO appointees had been making statements and claims without having studied the feasibility of their projects beforehand, and without consulting with all the parties involved. The RA-WCom further noted that applying for such loans cannot be done without first consulting the Residents'

Assembly or its representatives, and this has not been done. It also observed that the economic setup for such a loan to be repaid from Auroville maintenance seems hardly feasible and that a detailed financial analysis and approval by the residents (who would ultimately be held responsible to repay the loan) is a minimum requirement in a shared economy.

Free Service by Pour Tous Water
Pour Tous Water (PTW) has become a free service, following the decision made by the Residents' Assembly in January 2014. The BCC/FAMC and the Pour Tous Water team have reached an agreement that all PTW expenses will be covered by the BCC. A recurring monthly budget of approximately Rs 63,000 has been allocated for this purpose. PTW will now provide services free of charge to all Auroville residents, communities, services, and commercial units. Any necessary replacement materials will be provided at cost by PTW without additional charges.

RA News & Notes calls for support
The Residents' Assembly News & Notes editors reached out to the community as the community edition of the News & Notes (aka RA News & Notes) is in financial difficulties and needs help. Nearly a year and a half ago, the RA News & Notes was created with the intention of providing uncensored content to the community. While most members of the team volunteer their time, the recurring costs of around Rs 18,000 monthly, primarily for printing and distribution, are difficult to meet. The editors reminded the community that the continuation of the RA News & Notes depends on our collective effort and called for financial support.

About Auroville Today

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Contact: Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India, Phone: +91.413.2622572. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in.

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Auroville Today, Surrender community, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

Editorial team:

Alan, Carel, Chandra, Gita, Peter.
Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Print Editing: Jean-Denis.
Digital Editing: Krishna V
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