

## The Dreamweaving concludes

Recently, the Dreamweaving the Crown exercise finished. Approximately 70 people – Dreamweaving architects, their peers, multidisciplinary experts, focus groups and randomly selected members of the Residents Assembly – took part at various stages of the exercise, which began with a Crown walk at the end of December and concluded with an exhibition and presentation to the larger community in early April process [see AV Today no.391 for full details of the programme]. The final report, which includes the outputs and feedback from various participating groups (experts, focus group, and randomly selected citizens), as well as links to all of the pool of ideas, research and presentations, will be made available to the whole community. As mentioned in the brief, the report – representing the diverse voices of Auroville – will also be sent to Vastu Shilpa Consultants to support, inform, and inspire their detailed development work on the city.

Eleven dreamweaving teams participated. Although their backgrounds and orientations differed, and they focused on different aspects of the Crown, certain commonalities began to emerge during the process. One common theme was integration and synthesis – particularly of the Galaxy vision with the ground and bioclimatic realities. Another common theme was the need for diversity, for the Crown to provide a variety of different experiences as it passes through different zones and environments. Finally, there was a shared emphasis upon the need for the Crown to be human-centred: for pedestrians and cyclists to be prioritized, for the provision of plazas and safe, communal spaces, and for shading/ weather protection at all times of the year.

After the dreamweavers had made their final presentations, feedback was collected from the various participating groups. The ideas/designs that were most noted included sensitivity to and integration of context and ground realities (bioregion, canyons); defining the Galaxy by the blue/green network; safe and inclusive spaces/paths for children/ elderly/ everyone; slow, quiet, conscious transport with priority for pedestrians; the need for public transport systems (shuttles, electric buses etc); shade throughout day/year; and the Crown changing in width according to surroundings to minimise impact, reduce traffic, reduce monotony etc.

Regarding the process, what was most appreciated was the respectful collaboration between the dream-weaving architects and participants (“The fact of people coming together, learning to abdicate their own personal viewpoint, learning to collaborate, it’s wonderful”), as well as the collaborative support offered by



Participants examining a model of the Crown made during the Dreamweaving exercise



Discussing mobility as part of the Dreamweaving exercise

the experts, the organizing team and the wider community to this exercise. Many were also appreciative that this process was a harmonious, community-based response to a crisis situation.

The second most valuable aspect of the process identified across each group was how it fostered the integration of views – amongst architects, multidisciplinary experts and other members of the community. One participant noted that there was a “diversity of ideas and yet an underlying unity”.

What was also appreciated was the educational element, the high-quality input from the multidisciplinary experts, which represents a treasure trove of information for town planning that can be utilized for years to come, and the provision of a platform and safe space where the various points of view could work harmoniously together in widening their understanding.

Yet another plus was the transparency of the exercise (all the major presentations were livestreamed and recorded; the final report will include a complete resource guide available to everyone), which led one participant to remark it was “nice to see a design process that is not behind closed doors but arouses the whole community to be invested”. “This process has been a great example for organising things in a proper way and getting the community involved”, wrote another.

The majority of respondents identified the time constraint as the most challenging aspect of this process. Many of the dreamweaving architects felt they were not given enough time to make their presentations and to integrate the inputs they received. One of them commented, “This is not a work of eight or nine weeks. Many of these ideas need more space and time to germinate”.

The complexity of the task, which involved ‘weaving’ multiple inputs and many different layers together, was also mentioned as a challenge, while the ongoing tension in the community and the uncertainty about how or if the outputs would be manifested were also noted by some as concerns.

The final report notes that the key ‘take-aways’ from the process, according to participants’ feedback, were that “involvement and collaboration enriches the process and the outputs developed within it, that the Auroville community has an exemplary capacity to respond collectively to a challenge, and that the educational aspect of the process (including being exposed to a diversity of perspectives) is highly appreciated. In addition, respondents spoke of the potential for this process to be a model for addressing further planning needs and other community topics in Auroville as a key take-away from their experience”.

A further important take-away, noted by a focus group member, is “There is a delight in transcending ‘ownership’, that seems to be the

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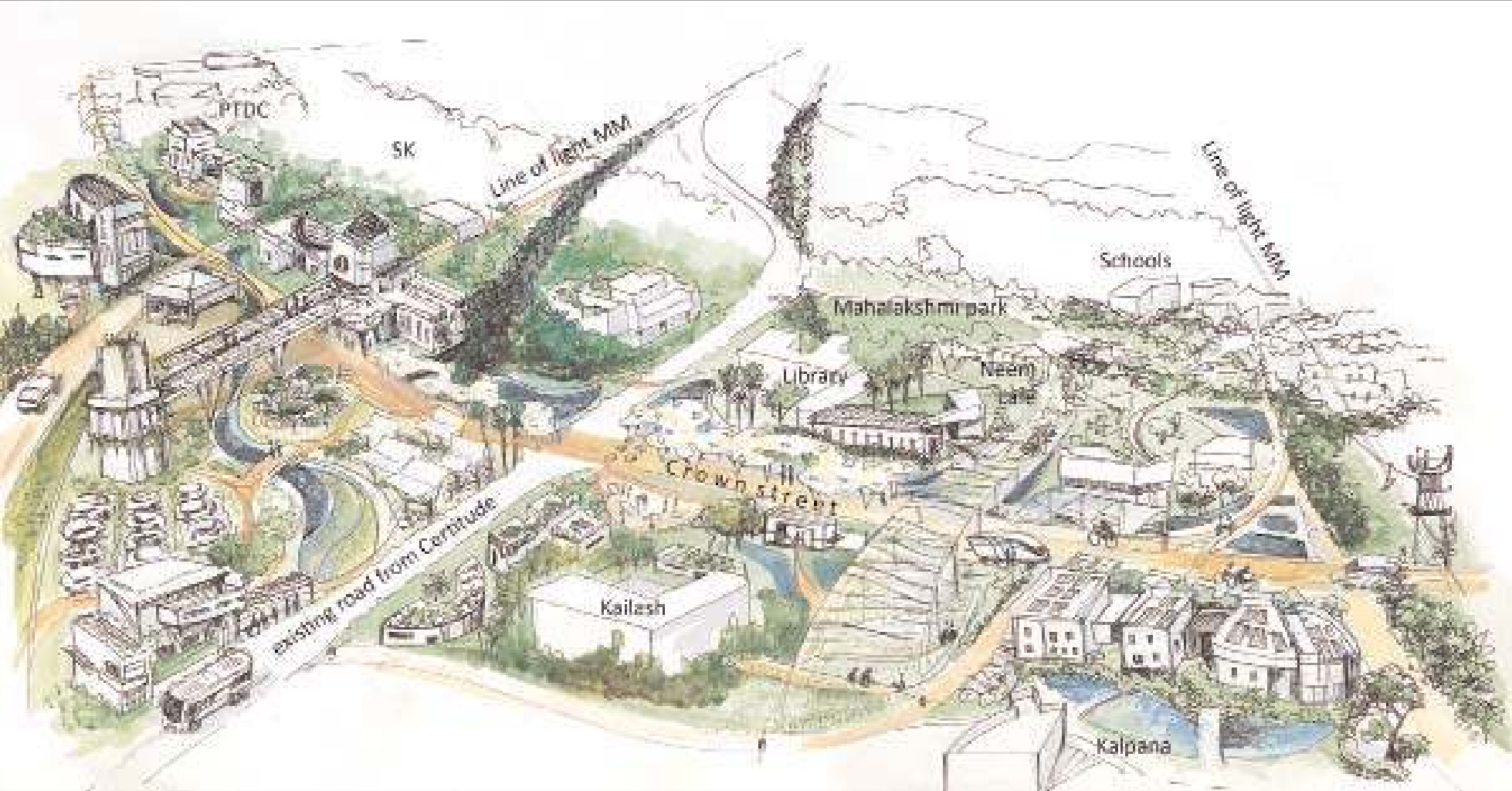
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Joyful, pedestrian friendly streets with beautiful urban infrastructure and furniture can provide an enlivening and uplifting backdrop to the daily life of the yogic city.

Some of the panels exhibited to the community at the completion of the Dreamweaving

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deeper direction called forth by the dreamweaving exercise. It holds a profound truth of Auroville.”

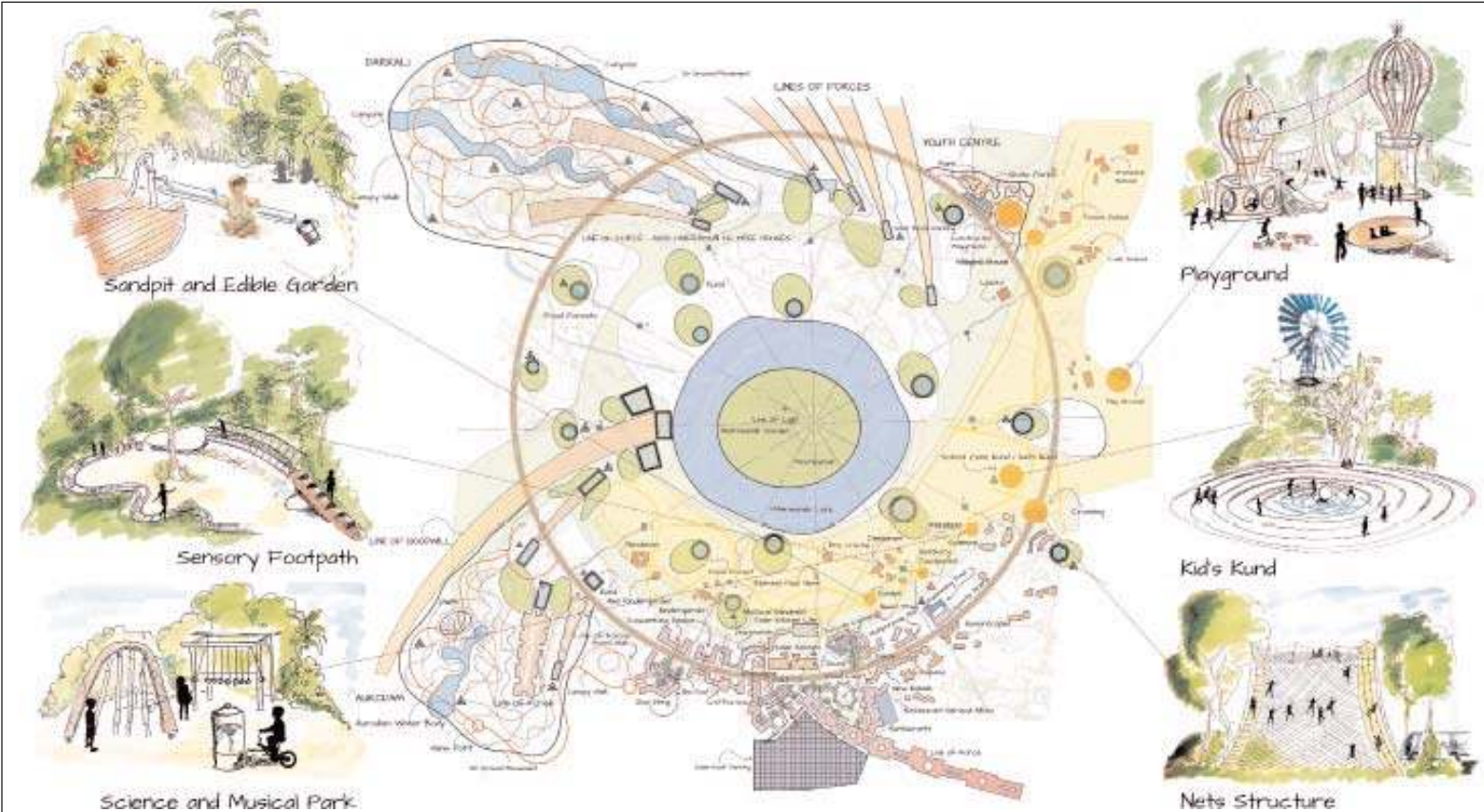
In the presentation to the larger community, the three holders of the process, David, Omar and Mona, also gave their final ‘candid’ statements about the exercise. They listed among the achievements the correction of an inaccurate narrative which implies that Aurovilians could not collaborate with each other or with external experts (“This unprecedentedly large-scale collaboration demonstrated not only that it is possible, but also that it can lead to richer and more inclusive results”); an amazing sense of fraternity among the participants, born out of a very concentrated and dedicated effort during which they learned to work very efficiently; success in bringing many different perspectives and interests to the table; and creating a practical model for collaborative planning work incorporating elements drawn from Dreamweaving and a previous Citizens’ Assembly.

They noted that fear is a factor that has prevented us in the past from reaching out for help to external experts, and even collaborating with different perspectives, because there is a concern that the original vision will be lost. “However, if we don’t reach out for help we may lose the very thing we are afraid of losing.” Finally, they hoped that the positive Dreamweaving experience (for almost everybody who participated in or observed the process rated it very highly) would inspire the community to “shift from a conflict-based approach to one in which multiple perspectives are integrated”. For, ultimately, at a time when the community is deeply split over the way in which the development of the Crown is happening, “we have to learn to forgive each other, to be compassionate towards each other, if we are to find a collaborative way forward, not only in planning but also in other fields of Auroville”.

Alan



Minimising of sun exposure to mobility sections through appropriate layout, orientation and scale of streets and other public spaces is vital. Public spaces should include appropriate tree cover, shading structures and utilise Auroville’s expertise in afforestation.



As the living artery of Auroville, the Crown should be manifested through a variety of urban forms and landscapes. There should be elements of contrast and continuity, from the highest to lowest densities and scales. The streets, plazas, buildings and urban fabric should support conscious collective life.



# Reflections upon the dreamweaving exercise

The dreamweaving process recently ended with an exhibition of the concepts and a public presentation to the community. Afterwards, six of the architects involved came together to reflect upon the experience, along with Mona who helped hold the dreamweaving process.

*Auroville Today: The dreamweaving process was very intense. How did you respond to the pressure?*

**Fabian:** I think the pressure started much earlier, after the Crown walk and the different community meetings from last July onwards. I joined the Dreamweaving not only as an architect but mostly as an Aurovilian close to the Youth Centre and Bliss Forest, hoping to help find a win-win way forward. We had long – in the end fruitless – negotiations with the current ATDC, and the events of December could have ended the possibility of doing this exercise.

Then, suddenly, the whole community was behind the dreamweaving idea, because people realised that the situation was really serious and we had to show a unified response. When we started the dreamweaving, it was never really clear if we were functioning independently, what was the role of the community, the TDC, and the Secretary, so I think we did a really good job, both individually and as a group, by staying focused on doing what we felt was right, and not getting distracted by all these other factors. I didn't block them out but managed to integrate them. In the end the seriousness of the situation actually pushed the creativity.

The process was complicated and challenging on an individual level. At one point, at the start of January, I was quite sick, and I feel a lot of the community is quite traumatized from the tension and the events of the last months.

**Dorle:** It was a rollercoaster. I felt pressure to do something that did justice to the task, which sometimes made me more determined, and sometimes it was intimidating, even a bit paralyzing, especially with the time constraints.

**I eha:** Each week as I worked on it there were moments when I felt crushed, and wanting to give up, but each time something within the process helped me get back on the drawing board with renewed purpose.

**Ganesh:** The most important thing for me was to have the safe space to do something; otherwise I wouldn't have been able to function when exposed to all the pressures.

**Shailaja:** The process was crushing, for sure. I fell sick for a couple of weeks; I would just get up for the next presentation, so it was really tough. But the pressure started earlier when meetings were happening all over Auroville and it was clear there were two sides. Many of us didn't want to align with either side because such exclusivity is tragic. At that time I felt paralysed. However, when the dreamweaving process began I felt enabled, I felt that now I had an opportunity to act, to do something meaningful. The pressure, however, was more internal, than external. The pressure to delve deeper, to work further on insights etc. in order to be relevant - week after week!

*How successful was the weaving? How much did you take from others, how much were you inspired by others?*

**Shailaja:** Many of us have been in Auroville for more than two decades so we already had ideas about the Galaxy plan and had done personal projects related to the plan. So there were a lot of ideas around, but they were at an individual level. This process helped bring them together. However, this is not a work of eight or nine weeks, and many of these ideas need more space and time to germinate.

But I was absolutely inspired by much that came up from the others, and this made me change/evolve my perspective a lot. For example, I used Ganesh's work as the basis for what I was working on, and I changed some parts of my plans after Marie's inputs, and inputs from the wider community.

**Tanja:** I only realised at the end how much the ideas and designs of Manu and myself changed over the course of this exercise. The feedback of all the participants was the main driving force for these changes. People gave us positive feedback for ideas we had just thought of but not detailed out, and this gave us the motivation to work further on them, otherwise I wouldn't have done that.

**Fabian:** I always wanted to see how the Galaxy can be manifested, anchored in the context of the bioregion and the history of the last 50 years. To enable any meaningful work on the Crown - as an essential element of the Galaxy plan - I needed to focus on a key aspect of our reality today, mobility, and so the idea of connecting the Crown with the larger road network somehow clicked. As this was outside what the others were doing, there was not much that I could take from their efforts.

However, I was really happy to see how the outer frame which I worked on allowed others to



From left: Fabian, Tanja, Shailaja, Neha, Dorle, Mona, Ganesh

feel that that was taken care of, so they could concentrate on other aspects.

**Ganesh:** For me the dreamweaving process was very difficult. I'd been looking at the Galaxy for years, but I had never looked at the Crown like this before. So my first need was to understand how I see the Crown, and this involved a dialogue with the Galaxy model. I feel I'm not finished with this yet, but then, at the beginning of January, we were already at the technical presentations stage. They were very good, so the second weave for me was how to internalize all this technical knowledge and mix it with my initial understanding of the Crown. I was struggling with this, day and night.

The third weave was when everybody started putting their ideas on the table. There was so much quality there I began to realize how much I needed to carry in my head to make the alchemy happen. It became very intense, even crazy. Everything in our household revolved around the Galaxy and the Crown, even when Neha [*his partner, another dreamweaving architect, eds.*] and I were doing the cooking. It was like a 24-hour dreamweaving process!

**I eha:** Ganesh and I had slightly opposing views, so we were constantly questioning each other. Personally, I'd been pushing myself to look at what seemed like separate, almost opposing, places to start from and attempting to synthesize these. So I was saying yes to the vision, yes to the context. I didn't want to say it was this or that, but this and that. The tighter things became outside, the more news we got about things that were not negotiable, the more I found myself pushing to find ways of processing and synthesizing the 'non-negotiables'.

**Ganesh:** One of the challenges was to find something that people with opposing views could feel okay with. To take the highest of what people on both sides hold, and merge them. Then there is nothing to react against. That was the challenge, that is the key. I think that was the whole intention of the dreamweaving exercise.

*Do you feel that the dreamweaving depersonalised what you were doing, that you felt part of something larger than yourself that wasn't 'owned' by any of you?*

**Mona:** I think everybody who has worked on this project feels it belongs to everybody, that it belongs to the larger community, which is amazing because normally a project has one architect who 'owns' it.

**Dorle:** I was looking at it from the point of view of what needed to be done, not so much what I would like to do. That is why I focused more on infrastructure and climate, because they are crucial, and infrastructure needed more innovative solutions.

**I eha:** There were moments when a beautiful synthesis did happen, but even in moments when it didn't, most of our work seemed to complement each other within the wider context.

**Fabian:** I think it's natural in an ever more complex world that as an individual your solution will never be as satisfying as when individuals work together. The 'we' is always much more than any 'I'. When you are in a safe space (now and here more important than ever) and have a shared vision (the Dream, the Charter and even the Galaxy), there is ideally no clash of egos. Working together has so much potential, and can be enormously joyful. However, you need good facilitation, and communication and collaboration involves a lot of patience, as well

as the capability to listen, to look within, to question yourself and see if you are ready to look for something that is not yet there.

**Shailaja:** As long as we are discussing at an ideas level, there is a lot of flexibility with each other's way of thinking, but once the project has to be manifested on the land, will we be that flexible? I'm not so sure.

**Ganesh:** I think it is the individual pushing him or herself which is crucial to the success of this process. The collective is important, you do take ideas from others, but those ideas have come because individuals were pushing themselves. So I feel when you're working, you should keep the collective out of your consciousness and just focus on your work.

Even when two people work on a project, they design individually and the mixing happens when both come to their top levels. You have to take things to a level where the solution becomes obvious, where there is no other choice.

**Mona:** We had a small experience of this in the Dreamspaces on the Greenbelt and the entrance to Auroville in 2006. When you empower somebody and let them run with it, they give their best. This is why creating a safe space is so important because it gives everybody the opportunity to raise the bar. When we are all working collectively for something higher, the result is the highest common factor, not the lowest common denominator.

*What about the larger significance of this particular exercise? Were you aware that many in the community had big expectations of this exercise?*

**Dorle:** I think that many people were putting a lot of hope on the Dreamweaving. I'm not sure we were able to meet their expectations. We did our best, but I don't know if we will achieve what we were hoping to achieve. But for Auroville as a whole I think it definitely achieved something. It built a certain togetherness in the wider community. People resonate when they see people participating in something that is for all of us. Whatever the outcome, that is also important.

**Ganesh:** Officially we had no status, we were not getting paid, and there was a certain purity in that. It was a pure offering, and it was that gesture to which the community responded.

**I eha:** In conclusion, I was hoping for in-depth conversations with the community over the output, as a first step towards a wider collaboration

**Fabian:** I was very aware of the significance of this process, of how this collaboration shows what can be done when people coming from very different backgrounds sit together, with open minds and hearts, and work on a difficult issue. I think this is the biggest plus of the process. This was so important at a time like this when one energy really believes that the way to go forward is a non-questioning, top-down approach, and there is another energy which tries to integrate. This is why I was so happy when Rajeev of the Vastu Shilpa Foundation, a professional planner who knows Auroville and India, all the time affirmed that the planning process has to be collaborative, that it cannot be anything else.

**Shailaja:** It's all about respect. Respecting that somebody has thought about something, so we need to listen to them and not immediately react. I think this is something which each individual needs to do with every other individual in this community.

*Do you think that this process could be used for other topics in the community?*

**Fabian:** I think it is very applicable for anything in Auroville. For any process that you want to deal with, the key ingredients are that people with different perspectives come to the table in a safe, well facilitated space, respectfully listen to each other, and then take the best of what they hear and constantly improve, evolve, it. This should work for everything, for families, communities, as well as topics like architecture, urban planning, governance, water management, bioregional communication etc. The ability to develop this kind of process, which is a tool to help us evolve on many levels, is one of the things that make Auroville unique.

*Have you been personally impacted or changed by this dreamweaving exercise, and if so how?*

**I eha:** It made me realise that I have to express myself, to keep standing for what I think, even though doing that is uncomfortable for me.

**Ganesh:** I feel I overdid it sometimes, the experience became too intense. When we started, we visited Darkali where part of the forest had been cut, and when you see that you realise something has to happen. But how to solve that problem, that was the core of what we were doing. Perhaps we didn't manage to solve anything, but, ideally, I feel we shouldn't lose the trajectory we developed in this space.

**Tanja:** For me it was super intense, and it pushed me to go deeply into the topic. I noticed that I like to work with groups of people to brainstorm ideas and come up with proposals. In fact, I would also have liked it if we had exchanged much more feedback among us architects during this process, but there was simply not enough time.

**Shailaja:** What came up for me was the fact of the very strong existence of the Galaxy plan, and the very strong existence of what already is, the ground reality. At a certain point in this process everybody was talking about both, not either/or, and I felt that was wonderful. My personal learning was actually they are both the same, they are one, and this is something I didn't know before. For me, that was a transformation.

**Fabian:** The dreamweaving was a very reaffirming experience because the last months were very difficult and a lot of people were even wondering if Auroville is still their place. So when, after our community presentation, people told me it had made them really aware of what a precious community we are, that helped me a lot. And to see that a large part of the community is behind such a collaborative effort, across cultures and different social backgrounds, is really great. It helped me to reconnect with the uniqueness of this community.

**Dorle:** One thing this exercise made me realise is that building Auroville is not going to be an easy task. Putting together the ground realities, climatic conditions, sustainable building practices and the Galaxy vision is more challenging than I had assumed because there are so many levels and things to integrate, which one only sees when one starts to work on it. It's certainly more complex than just putting buildings on the land.

**Mona:** As a co-facilitator of this whole dreamweaving process, I was learning so much. It was a great team effort with the Citizens' Assembly team, and it has given so much hope because now the community will remember that something like this is possible, even if it may not get fully implemented. But we have to keep up our efforts towards achieving that: we shouldn't throw in the towel too soon.

From a discussion facilitated by Alan



# The new selection policy

Over the years, the community has selected members to serve in its major working groups. In the early years, this was comparatively simple, as there were few residents and only one or two such groups, and everybody knew each other well.

The members of these groups were chosen in community meetings. However, as the population grew, the number of these working groups proliferated, and their power increased, and more formal methods of selection were adopted. Consensus, although still recognized as the ideal, was increasingly abandoned in favour of voting. At the same time, there were an increasing trend of individuals seeking selection to major groups not because they wanted to serve the larger community, but because they had a specific agenda they wished to promote/implement, or because they wanted to further the interests of a certain group. And this led to politicking - to some individuals seeking votes or to groups supporting their candidates.

The last selection process represented possibly the lowest point in this decline as ballot boxes were tampered with, and some individuals were selected with only about 30% of the total votes - which were cast by only a small percentage of the total adult population.

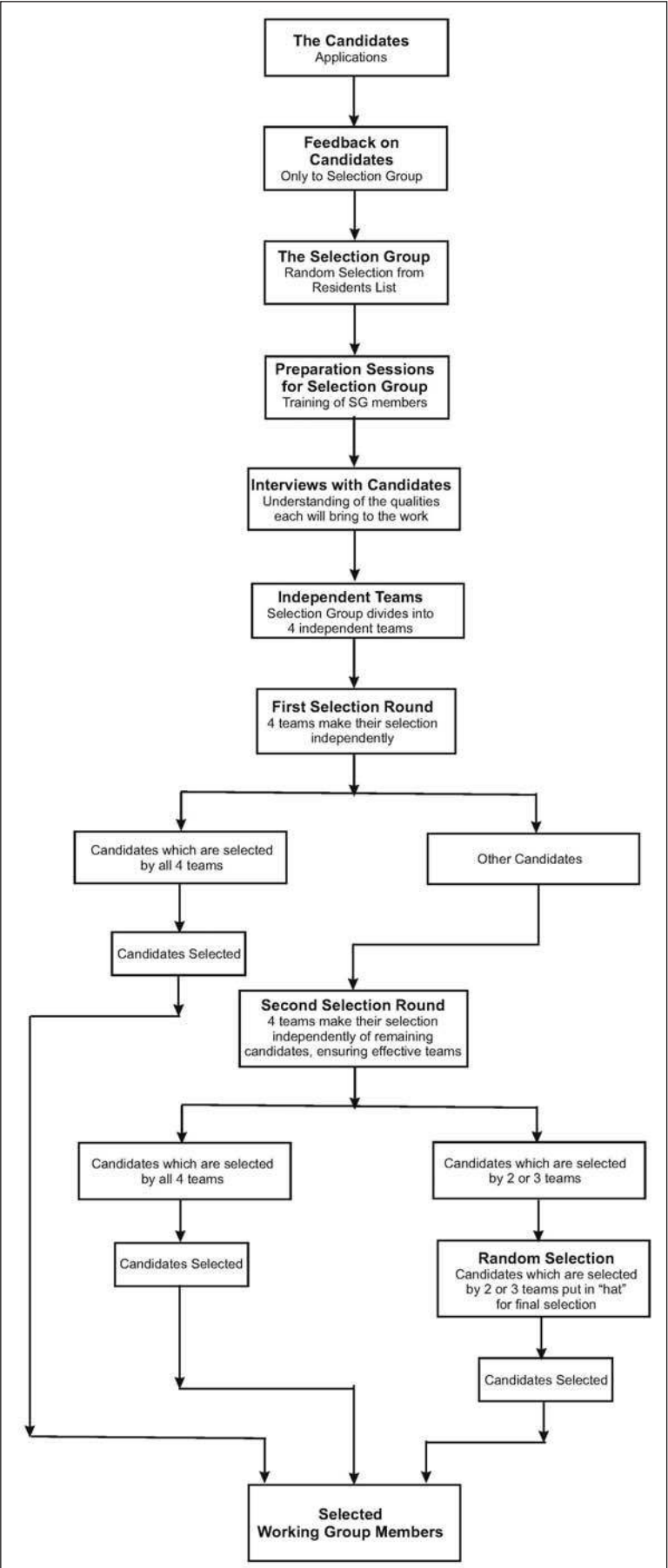
It was a shock and a wake-up call for the whole community. An investigation was made, and the investigating group came up with some recommendations. These were that the process to select members of working groups by the residents should foster trust, harmony and human unity, not division. Therefore any selection process should avoid voting, because this promotes politics and political polarisation.

A call went out to the community to join a Selection Process Review Task Force (SPRTF) which was tasked with coming up with a new selection process based upon these recommendations. Twelve people put their names forward, out of whom the Council chose seven by random selection. Of these seven, some dropped out, one sadly passed away, and in the end only three finished the job, one working remotely.

Their initial proposal was brought to a community meeting. After receiving feedback, they made a number of amendments, then brought a new draft to a second community meeting where it was agreed that the new process for selecting members of the Working Committee, Auroville Council, FAMC, Entry Board, and ATDC would be submitted to the community for a Residents Assembly Decision (RAD).

On the 19th April, the Residents Assembly Service (RAS) announced the result of the RAD. 95% (349) Aurovilians voted in favour of the new proposal, 5% (19) rejected it. Consequently, the RAS announced that the new selection policy would be implemented.

What is new?  
Because of the need to avoid politics and voting, the Selection Task Force fairly quickly decided there should be some kind of randomness in the process to avoid the selection being easily influenced by different groups. They decided that the actual selection should be made not by the whole community but by a group of randomly chosen community members. In a similar manner to the Citizens' Assembly experiment, these would receive training in bias detection and consensus building, as well as information about the qualities and skills needed in the different working



groups they were selecting for, in order to give them the skills and knowledge to do this important work.

The Task Force also decided that the forty randomly chosen selectors together would interview all the applicants, but then they would split into four groups to make their decisions independently, so that there would be no cross-influencing.

If all four groups selected the same person for a working group position, the selection of that person would be confirmed. If positions still needed to be filled in the working group (s), there would be a second round. In this round, the selection groups would be told who had been already been selected, and who were the ongoing members of a working group. So now they could make a further selection on the basis of which skills or qualities they felt the working group was still missing, and which people they felt would be able to work together well. In other words, now they were choosing a group as well as individuals.

Once again, in the second round the remaining candidates chosen by all four groups would be considered selected. Other candidates who had been selected by at least two of the groups would have their names put in an opaque container or entered in a computer programme. If they had been nominated by three groups their name would be included three times in the 'hat', twice if nominated by two groups. Then the names would be drawn randomly to fill the remaining positions.

However, there would be no obligation on the selection teams to select people for all the vacant positions on the working group. If the teams felt that not enough candidates were suitable, those positions would remain vacant, and a new selection process for that working group could be scheduled.

The new selection process is very much built upon trust. Trust that a random selection of Aurovilians will make wise decisions, once they have received training and appropriate information about the task. But they are also trusted to make their own decision within their sub-groups about how they select candidates. They will receive feedback from the community regarding the candidates, but it is up to them to decide if the feedback will influence their choice, as no candidate will be disqualified beforehand. Again, if the people in a sub-group cannot reach consensus, and if they think voting is a good thing, they can adopt that method. Also, if they want a facilitator, they can ask for it. It is completely up to them.

One strong feedback from the larger community on the drafts of the new policy, a feedback which was not incorporated, was a request to include a de-selection process as it was felt that the existing process - which allows only the working group to de-select one or more of its members - was inadequate to deal with the present situation, in which two major working groups have lost the confidence of part of the community.

However, this request came late when only three were left in the original Process Review Task Force, and it would have required much more work. Instead, the Council has been asked to take up the de-selection process as a priority.

Meanwhile, the overwhelming support given to the new selection policy by those who voted in the RAD indicates not only that many in the community are ready for a change, but also they feel that this proposal will go some way towards fostering a new spirit of trust and collaboration, rather than that of division, when it comes to selecting people for our key working groups.

Let us hope that these hopes are fulfilled.

Alan

A year ago, students from The Learning Community [TLC: see Auroville Today April 2022, no. 393] cycled to Cinema Paradiso to watch a movie on Summerhill School. Summerhill, which is located in the U.K., is a progressive school which has been experimenting with democratic education since 1922. In many ways it shares a common educational philosophy with TLC, so it wasn't surprising that the TLC students were interested.

So interested, in fact, that a group of them are hoping to visit Summerhill this August, when Summerhill will be celebrating its hundredth anniversary by putting on a 'Festival of Childhood', inviting youth and teachers in progressive education from all over the world to share their experiences.

"We would like to go there to represent TLC and Integral Education," says Mohini. "But we would also like to learn what other progressive places are doing, and then try to make TLC better on the basis of that." "We want to learn new information and skills, and understand the different ways in which schools run themselves democratically," says Chandni.

"One of the things we are looking for is how Summerhill works with democracy," says Mohini. "We have community gatherings twice a week in TLC and one of our biggest problems is how to follow through on decisions we take there. If you swear at somebody, it is seriously not okay and something has to happen, but what? We may suggest something, but what happens if that doesn't happen?"

## Project Summerhill



From left: Maisie, Manu, Chandni, Mohini, Lea

One of the things that impresses them about Summerhill is the willingness of that community to call a community meeting whenever one is necessary, not to wait until a set time in the week. "If a problem comes up, they try to deal with it immediately."

How will they present TLC at the Festival?  
"We'll say that TLC is a school where you need a lot of drive and self-motivation and TLC builds this, and once you have that you can do anything," continues Mohini. "We learn a lot at TLC. We'll be presenting some of our projects, because we don't spend our time just climbing trees, as some people in Auroville seem to think!" They will also show and answer questions on the award-winning film about TLC made by Alessandra Silver.

One of the projects they will be presenting at

the Festival is their newspaper, with which Mohini, Chandni and Clara of the Summerhill group are involved. Recently the young editors took on their most challenging topic yet: trying to understand dissensions around the Crown. To do this, they delved into the history of the Galaxy concept and the Master Plan, and attended all the meetings called by different groups, even interviewing the Secretary.

What did they learn?  
"People were very quick to judge. We felt they needed to look at problems less from their own perspective and do more research on the subject before they give their opinion on it," concludes Mohini. "We did research, we went into all the details, while many others were just repeating what they heard from someone else as their opinion."

Now they are in the process of fundraising for the Summerhill trip. How are they raising the money?

"Originally, we made wooden boxes in Fertile as a gift for those who made a donation," says Chandni. Now they are making sunflower brooches, instead because "it's super difficult to make a lot of boxes. We made thirty so far and it took us two or three months!"

They also organized a fundraising event on Wednesday, April 13, which involved dinner, live music, and an auction where children and parents offered their skills and products. They raised Rs 75,000. They have also applied to the Project Coordination Group for financial help, and "I've written something about the whole thing, about Summerhill being a democratic school, and we put it on AuroNet and in the News and Notes and on Instagram," adds Manu. "We're already getting quite a lot of donations through Instagram."

Are they at all overawed by the challenge of raising the money and travelling to the U.K.?

Not at all. They seem confident that they will raise the funding (they have already raised over two lakh rupees of the 6-7 lakhs they will need). And "It's the first time that we will go out of India as a group of TLC kids. We're really looking forward to it!" enthuses Chandni.

Alan

If you would like more information about TLC's Project Summerhill, please contact: mohini@auroville.org.in



# The jump that is still to be made

## Are we ready to coordinate Auroville's food sector?

In September 2011, an ad-hoc 12-member steering group published a Five Year Sustainable Agriculture Plan which argued that sustainable organic agriculture could be massively increased for Auroville if heavy investments in existing and new farms were made, and if FoodLink - the nexus between the farmers and consumers that manages the demand-supply gap - developed into a large organization. It would also be necessary that more residents participated in the food and agriculture sector of Auroville and that food habits changed. "The time has come for a big jump," concluded the group. [see *AVToday* September 2011, # 266].

Today, more than 10 years later, the jump is still to be made. As compared to 2011, the community consumption and farm productivity has not meaningfully increased. The large investments required for improving existing agricultural land and to develop new land, in 2011 estimated at Rs. 10 crores in the 5-year plan period, have not materialized. Meanwhile, the development of FoodLink has stalled and the food and farming sector lacks a clear direction. So what next?

### A new research and offer

In the beginning of this year, a 4-member study group (Allan, Avinash, Fred and Nidhin) began analyzing Auroville's food sector, helped by the Budget Coordination Committee which allocated it a three-months' research budget. In April, it presented its findings to the Funds and Assets Management Committee, highlighting some of the barriers to greater food autonomy that are being faced by food sector. With Isabelle joining the team, they are now putting themselves forward to offer services to overcome some of the challenges identified.

### Food sector challenges

Their research findings reach some strong conclusions, pointing to systemic gaps between the current reality and the ideal scenario for Auroville's unique needs and aspirations.

The main hurdle is that the food sector in Auroville is largely unplanned, seasonal and uncoordinated, and the current system forces farmers to compete with each other and the outside market while producing for Auroville. There is no coordinated plan to meet the needs of Auroville in an efficient / mutually supportive way, leading to unpredictability and volatility in the food supply coming from Auroville farms. This unreliable internal market has pushed some farms to also take on their own marketing and distribution at the same time as distribution centres and eateries are procuring the bulk of their products from external markets. These critical information and coordination gaps are where the new team hopes to offer their energy and skills.

The team also report that there are no formal commitments or systemic support for the community distribution centres and eateries to utilise Auroville farm products; they feel constrained by consumer (Aurovilian) tastes and preferences, which are not necessarily focused on locally-grown produce. At the end of the day, farms are regularly having good produce turned away at FoodLink, or returned days later spoiled. In consequence, the farms and food sector suffer: if they cannot sell their produce in

Auroville, they have to find a market outside or accept a loss, feeding the returns to the cows.

This has a constricting and demotivating effect for Auroville farmers who generally just want to focus on producing healthy food for the community. The eateries emphasise high price as a barrier when it comes to opting for Auroville produce. The fact that Auroville farm produce is organic, and that food items bought on the external market are often non-organic and produced in ecologically unsustainable ways, does not overcome the price-barrier that Aurovilians face with the limited maintenance. The five-year Plan from 2011 offered a potential solution: that Auroville subsidises the crops so that the price of non-organic foods from Pondicherry market would be the same as the price for organic produce from Auroville. But this proposal has never taken off.

The realities of climate, season, soil conditions, and water availability make it difficult, if not impossible, for Auroville farms to produce a major part of the 'demands' of the community. Typical farm production oscillates between peaks in the cool season, when the weather is conducive to a wider diversity of crops, and a deeper shortage in the hot season. The group observed that the economics of small organic farms are poor and often not well understood, neither by the farms themselves nor by the larger community. Many farms are kept afloat by either personal funds, sometimes only the maintenance of the farmer, or through external donations. Currently, only the 'maintenance' of the managers of the farms are covered systematically by the recurring city services budget. A few farms are exploring food processing (jams, preservatives, cheese) to help make ends meet.

Earlier this year, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) conducted a farm survey as part of their efforts to understand and support the farm sector to better fulfill its potential. The research group helped FAMC analyse the priorities and needs of the farms. It was found that the priorities were infrastructural investments, mainly fencing as many farms suffer from wild animals grazing on their crops which are inadequately protected, housing for Auroville residents working on the farms, storage facilities and machinery.

Overall, the systemic gaps leave farms caught in unhealthy, even toxic dynamics which prevent deeper collaboration and a cohesive voice for other stakeholders to engage with. This has led to a lack of trust, and missed opportunities for the wider sector as well as competition for financial resources and power politics within the farm group. This also gets in the way of developing the culture of sharing 'best practices', training novices and skill development.

### Is a top-down directive required?

The team feels that a "centre-out approach", rather than a "top-down", would be more suitable and aligned to the spirit of service and experimentation of those involved. There is a need for a Food Group to form with a representation of all the stakeholders and the endorsement of the community (perhaps through the FAMC), to set direction and policies for the sector. The emerging coordination service is offering to lay the groundwork for this and to carry the technical and administrative work involved.

Along with that, FoodLink currently sees itself becoming more independent from the farms to better fulfil their service of marketing and distributing farm produce. To build capacity in the system, investments are recommended in storage, processing and marketing of any farm produce that cannot be used directly in Auroville outlets. The group pointed out that there is a large interest from outside Auroville in Auroville food products, as in the case of the bakery. A vegetable shop that sells high quality organic produce and processed food products from Auroville might do well, but the priority for the sector remains the feeding of the community. Such measures could go a long way to reducing the currently constrained and competitive nature of the farming sector.

### A pilot project

The research group also proposes to hold a pilot project to demonstrate a planned production and consumption model, so as to move away from non-planned and competitive production, starting with a few products. This would be open to anyone interested, on a voluntary basis and give the necessary confidence with commitments from producers and consumers. This would include standardised information sharing to help forecast supply and demand and promote transparency between the participants. This would also be an opportunity to bring together the proposed Food Group on a practical project.

### Can we change food habits?

The group proposes to explore how to influence food habits to support Auroville's food autonomy. The produce that the Auroville farms can grow, such as millets, is not always to the liking of the consumers, who favour foods that are mainstream in their culture. There is also a large demand for vegetables and fruits that can only be grown in colder climates. The group proposes that the various food outlets start promoting locally-grown foods by dedicating a section of their outlet to Auroville produce and making interesting recipes freely available at the outlet and on a dedicated website. The eateries too could help by having at least one dish every day made with locally-grown produce. Critics may argue that all this has been proposed before, with no or little effect, and question why it should be more successful this time. But it's worth a try.

### In conclusion

The group emphasises the complexity of the food sector and the necessity that the Auroville community becomes aware of the problems of the farms, distributors and kitchens and consciously tries to help them develop. They warn that addressing the parts individually (such as pushing for increasing production alone) might offer temporary relief but the system will soon face the next bottleneck. A big integral effort needs to be made to increase Auroville's food security. Large financial support will be required to move towards greater food autonomy and resilience for Auroville. With a concerted effort from the Aurovilians, and the financial backing required, the big jump might become feasible

Carel

## Of farms, fences, and funds

On a recent Thursday morning, there were sharings by a number of Auroville farmers related to new and on-going initiatives on the lands they steward, along with the many immediate challenges they face. The event was organized by the small team of Fundraising Consultancy for Auroville Projects, a recently registered service unit. Attendees included stewards or representatives of a dozen Auroville Farms, food processing units, the Budget Coordination Committee, as well as other interested Aurovilians.

Each of the farms had a valuable story to tell. Kottakarai Farm was able to continue engaging children from surrounding village schools and the Auroville Kindergarten on the land, even through the Covid lockdowns and school closures. The programme allows children to directly connect with the soil and each stage of growing and harvesting produce. Buddha Garden has evolved a body of sustainable practices, a flourishing micro-green production and packaging set up (sandwiched among fruit orchards and intense vegetable production), as well as strong volunteer and visitor programmes. Kalpavruksha is a family effort, focused on Zero Budget Natural Farming and developing a Seed Bank for local crop varieties. At Auro Orchard, a committed team of young Aurovilians has come together

to focus on a sustainable model to carry the farm forward for the next 50 years, building on all that Gerard and Bithi have accomplished over the last 50 years.

While the range of soil, crops, practices, and activities varies widely, the farms largely face similar challenges. Whether old or new, big or small, virtually every farm desperately needs funds for fencing to protect the land from encroachment, cow and goat herds, and burgeoning wildlife (pigs, deer, porcupines, peacocks, mongooses). Some farms require greenhouses to nurture seedlings in the harsh local climate and to considerably expand vegetable production seasons. Other farms require basic housing for Aurovilians and volunteers who work the land, manage farm systems, or run complementary research, educational, and food processing activities. Most farms would benefit from investments in equipment and machinery. On older farms, physical infrastructure (including those fences) needs repair or rebuilding, as such things age quickly in this climate. Newer farms need to start building to begin adequately protecting the land and to scale up farm capacity.

Initially, Auroville farm and forest land was largely purchased and developed through personal funds raised by pioneers with foreign passports.



**Model of a fence for Annapurna Farm. The farm's periphery is about 7 kilometres. At a costs of Rs 2,500/metre, the complete fencing of the farm would entail a costs of 175 lakhs (US \$ 230,000). Since the farm is divided into 5 separate parcels fencing can be done in parts.**

They donated all personal savings and all they could earn by leaving Auroville to work in their country of origin for a few years. As stewards, they then called on friends from abroad to chip in what they could. Such funds went a long way at the time. But the current reality is different. A new generation of young people on various farms are enthusiastic

to take over from aging stewards, to pour their energy, sweat, and organizational skills into robust farming models capable of meeting Auroville's food security needs, even as it grows. But this generation has no financial means. And Aurovilian farmers from local villages never had such resources to begin with. At present, Auroville has no general land maintenance or development budget. While the Farm Group is allocated a budget, it is far from sufficient even to cover the maintenance/basic income of all those who work on the farms.

In order to access funds from foundations or large corporations with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, farms would generally have to conduct research or offer specialized educational programmes and training related to regenerative, innovative, sustainable green practices and models. The Fundraising Consultancy unit has already called for rough project proposals from the farms and now intends to help refine and reshape these proposals to better align them with available funding options and statutory requirements. Sigrid is sure that her unit will be able to match farms with appropriate foundations and CSR funding once the proposals are more professionally framed. To make them appealing to donors, farms would also need to

collaborate to create large enough projects, both in terms of funds and impact. After the funding comes through, the Consultancy unit will provide project monitoring and donor reporting support.

At the same time, Sigrid knows that this type of grant-oriented funding can only meet some part of the farms' financial needs. In fact, there are little to no funds available from institutional donors for large equipment, machinery, or infrastructure investment and maintenance. Furthermore, funding is just one aspect of what the farms require to become viable models. Having spent many years fundraising for Auroville land, Sigrid is also keenly aware of the larger issues and pressures related to acquiring, protecting, and ultimately farming or afforesting the land. And so she hopes to draw the community's attention back to the land and the ways that all of Auroville will have to take responsibility to support this collective resource.

Many in Auroville have moved on from (or have never known) the physical toil of the early pioneer years. Meanwhile this work continues, day after day, on farms that are intended to support Auroville's food needs through sustainable models, but don't yet have the capacity to do so.

Gita S.

For further information visit: <https://fundraising-Aurovilleprojects.com/>



# The National Green Tribunal judgment

On April 28th, 2022, the Southern Bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) Chennai, comprising judicial member Justice K. Ramakrishnan and expert member K. Satyagopal, delivered a 78-page judgment in a case started by two Aurovilians against the Auroville Foundation in December last year, after the Foundation had felled many trees in the Bliss forest in clearing a path for the Crown Road. The Foundation was proceeding towards the Darkali forest to continue clearing trees for the Crown Road when the NGT passed an interim order directing the Foundation not to cut any further trees. This interim order was extended on various occasions. [see AVToday #390 of January 2022]

The Bench now directed the Auroville Foundation not to fell any more trees for the Crown Road until a Joint Committee, appointed by it, conducts an inspection of the plan site and submits a report within two months to the

Auroville Foundation. The joint committee consists of the Collector, who is chairman of the District Green Committee, and the Forest Officer not below the rank of Conservator of Forest, as deputed by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and the Chief Wildlife Warden, Tamil Nadu.

The NGT ordered that the Joint Committee inspect the area and find out whether, by reducing the width of the road at suitable places or through a slight realignment, the number of trees be cut could be minimised in accordance with The Mother’s vision of creating a green cover.

It also directed the Joint Committee to ascertain whether there were any water bodies / streams in that area. If the road passed through the water body, it should spell out the way in which the road would have to be constructed by elevation, without affecting the water body / water flow or with a bed-level causeway with a box type of vents. If such a recommendation was made, it

would have to be implemented and the Foundation is directed to carry out the Crown Road work in the impugned area with tree cover, strictly in accordance with the recommendations made by the Joint Committee.

The Foundation is also directed to plant trees in the ratio of 1 : 10 for the number of trees to be cut, and the species to be recommended by the Joint Committee may be considered for planting either on the side of the road or other area identified by the Joint Committee, in order to protect environment and also to maintain the green cover in that area.

The NGT, considering it as an exceptional circumstance, granted conditional permission to the Foundation to complete the Crown Road in the remaining stretches where there are no trees and take action against unauthorized occupations, if any, in accordance with the law, even before obtaining environmental clearance for further activity.

The NGT also directed the Foundation to prepare a proper township plan either in respect of the 778 hectares which is in its possession, or in respect of the 1963 hectares which was visualized by the Mother, by identifying the locations where each zone will have to be located. The plan should also map the locations where the roads will have to be laid, showing the location of the ring roads with their width and further roads, if any, to be constructed, the nature of industries and other activities which they expect to establish in the township. The plan should also indicate the number of phases of work and if it is not going to be implemented as one phase, how many phases in which the Foundation is are going to complete the project and then apply for Environmental Clearance (EC) as it will fall under Item 8 (b) of the EIA Notification, 2006 as amended from time to time. Till then the Foundation is directed not to proceed with further construction in the project area.

## NEW BOOKS

# The Sun-eyed Children

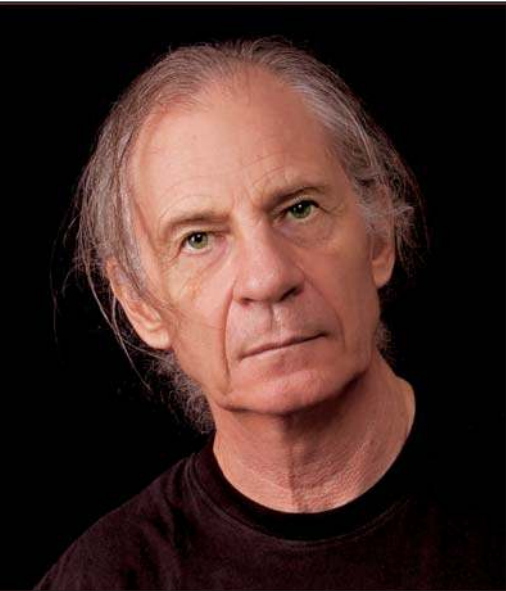
An interview with Joel Koechlin

**Auroville Today: Can you talk about the mix of fact and fiction in your novel?**

**Joel:** This book should be seen as an autobiographical novel. The main protagonist, Lionel bears some resemblance to me, but is not exclusively me. Any form of writing is partially autobiographic; you can’t properly write about things that you have never experienced as it won’t carry a deep truth.

*There is an intermingling of pasts, presents and even future in your novel.*

Even when I venture into historical fiction, it is the result of some intuitive knowledge which corresponds to past experience. For instance, in the chapters involving Joan of Arc; since early childhood I have felt a



Joel Koechlin

close connection with that period in history, with the events and the characters. It’s a deep connection experienced in childhood dreams and fiery intuitions, those things that you know, without remembering why you know them. I tend to believe there is a state of consciousness where there is no past, present or future; they all exist simultaneously.

Such concepts are more generally understood these days. For instance, in the movie ‘Interstellar’, there is this scene taking place within a ‘Tesseract’ that contains all time dimensions in one single location. Time doesn’t flow like a river – that is only for our limited human perception. Somewhere, everything which existed, exists, and will exist, is accessible in one single place. This corresponds to where the new physics is going towards. In the chapters of the book involving The Mother and Satprem, she demonstrates that she is not limited by space and time and can be everywhere and everywhen. She has access to this other non-linear dimension.

For example, when she described the Matrimandir chamber, it wasn’t based on any aesthetic or practical consideration, it was because she has seen it in the future as it would be. Similarly, when Lionel meets her and gets her message to go to the Himalayas, it’s not for a change of air, but because she has seen, yes seen, the great possibility awaiting him over there.

*Jung talked of teleology and of the future calling us, does that inform your writing of Lionel’s journey?*

When you are in the action, you are completely blind, it’s only afterwards that you can link the dots. But in the action, at least in my personal experience, it is total tragic blindness – you do not understand anything of what is happening to you. When Lionel was told to go to the Himalayas, there was no address given. And this mountain range is 3000 kilometers long! Only later you understand that it was not necessary and that destiny, or the Mother, or the Divine, whatever you name it, will bring you there inevitably. It would demand a tremendous effort to break this line of destiny. When you finally get there, then there are options and – most importantly – soul choices. For instance, in Rome there is an option for Lionel, whether to go East to Kabul or west to Morocco. Or in Munich, to jump into a bus or stay in Europe and continue his dilapidated life. These soul choices will always be leaps of faith.

*This book has a strong flavour of the 1960s. How much did that influence the founding of Auroville?*

I think Auroville was created by the spirit of the 1960s. Many of the people who came in the beginning, of course each of them had a different story and path, but the beginning of Auroville was a direct inspiration of the rebellious 1960s and 70s. Many of them didn’t have money, they started working here, living on ‘prosperity’ – a wonderful, simple system to provide for the needs of residents, that the Mother had put in place at the beginning of Auroville, which unfortunately became diluted in time.

*Is Lionel’s story universal?*

I am unable to say. I appreciate that, in the book’s foreword written by my daughter Kalki, she said “so what is this idea that the brain only takes in what it’s ready for? Does that mean that we are constantly missing out on details of the world we are not ready for?” It’s universal if it speaks to all. I have a cousin who read and liked the book, despite the fact that she saw in it only several unrelated stories. This book is made of several layers. All layers are not seen by all readers; despite this, strangely, they all like the book.

*You met the Mother and Satprem. Was that experience in the book?*

Yes of course – you read it! There are three chapters – ‘The Mother’, ‘The Answer to the Question’ and ‘Interlude in Time’ – which dwell on my personal experience of meeting the Mother.

*Lionel stayed dedicated to following his path, despite intense challenges, what kept him going in the difficult times?*

The answer to this is two-fold:

1) how could he reject a command brought forward by the one he has just seen, experienced as an avatar of the divine, and that clearly says: “this is the possibility of his life.” – that itself gives immense strength... and,

2) In truth, he had no choice!

*Your write a lot about destiny. Do you feel this book wanted itself written, which some authors speak of?*

Certainly, despite my earnest efforts to evade writing it, this book wanted to be written! Edzard kicked my ass to get me on the job. In the back of my

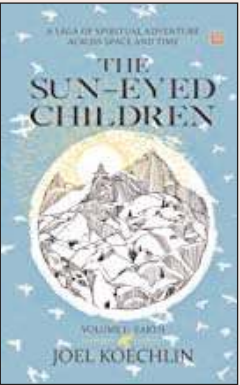
## The Sun-eyed Children A Spiritual Journey across Space and Time

*I saw them cross the twilight of an age,  
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn,  
The great creators with wide brows of calm,  
The massive barrier-breakers of the world  
And wrestlers with destiny in her lists of will,  
The labourers in the quarries of the gods,  
The messengers of the Incommunicable,  
The architects of immortality.*  
**Savitri, Book III, Canto IV**

In the growth and busyness of today’s Auroville we can forget the many small miracles that contributed to its formation, those men and women of goodwill mysteriously drawn here, via dreams, books, synchronicities and all that chance entails. In the footsteps they left and are still leaving is a legacy of dedication to the ideals of our community that they help start to build. Some of these stories of how the pioneers and subsequent followers ended up here, on the barren red soil of South India, are more outlandish than any fiction.

Joel Koechlin’s book, *The Sun-eyed Children*, catches the spirit of those founding years, how those ‘sun-eyed children’ were drawn to this unique divine experiment. It is also a portrayal of the hippy Zeitgeist, those who dropped out and tuned into to wherever their muse led them. Fate and how it calls us, weaves itself throughout this story; “Destiny had been whirling around him all the time, and in that timeless moment, she had caught him in her arms, squeezing him, leaving him breathless.”

This is a book of fact and fiction based on the journey of the protagonist ‘Lionel’, written with an authority that only life’s lessons bring, as he lives a life of rebellion, leaving France for his journey East, becoming a seeker. Travelling to Kabul and onto Varanasi, he is finally led to his port,



or portal, Pondicherry. Koechlin does not disguise the hardships of the spiritual path in its lostness, the missed spiritual opportunities, the sheer struggle to wrestle with destiny, as well as the prosaic impacts of Indian travel on our bowels and our wellbeing.

Mixed in with Lionel’s quest in India are memories of previous incarnations, including those in the eras of Joan of Arc, Merlin and the Round Table, and even a reference to a future incarnation.

After meeting The Mother and Satprem he is told to go to the Himalayas but not what he will find there. Again and again, Lionel learns the lessons of following the path of no instructions, other than to follow the breadcrumbs back to our true self, the mythic journey of the Sannyasi of old.

At one moment in the book, weaving together past lives, souls gather to build the Matrimandir: wizards from ancient pasts and soldiers who had the grace to meet Her, join to build a city of the Dawn; “a reunion of

mankind: a gathering of all creeds, colours, ages, and genders; all poised in a unified effort to embody the Divine on Earth.” Describing working on building the Matrimandir, and how all gave themselves with no thought of reward, what more could one want when immersed body and soul in this fabulous adventure? There were no distractions in the desert. The greatest beauty was that the Matrimandir was their life and their life was the Matrimandir.”

As befits a translator of *Savitri*, quotations from the poem garland the story, as does the title itself. This auto-biographical novel carries memories, atmospheres and telling details, allowing us to experience some of that ‘twilight of an age’.

Peter

*The Sun-Eyed Children – A Spiritual Journey across Space and Time* is available at Amazon. Price in India Rs 245.

mind, I always had the idea that some day these experiences would have to be put into words. I was very busy with other things, writing was not my speciality, my English needed perfecting. I was postponing and lazy while I didn’t realise it would be a much bigger job than I would expect. Thanks to Edzard who nagged me for months, if not years, I finally dived into the task. And I realised ‘Yes this is something which has value’ in terms of experience. Yes, this book had a destiny.

*The book has a sequel.*

Volume 1 is called Earth. Vol 2 will be Mars. I have started the sequel in a modest way. I believe that the expansion of mankind through space is inevitable as a natural part of evolution. It’s like the crossing of the Atlantic, for good or bad, it was unavoidable. The 2nd volume begins on Mars, but it’s

similar to the first book in that there will be fluidity in the time line; past, future and present will flow in a strange pattern.

We can make a very beautiful Auroville on Mars! Mars is a fantastic opportunity for creating a new society with a minimal burden of the past. When we started Auroville we came to a red desert. Mars happens to be a red desert of another kind, except that we will need to wear pressure suits till we terraform the planet. Look how we have regenerated the desert of Auroville in just 50 years! I can’t imagine anything more challenging and appealing. Many will say “what’s the use of this?” To me, we are already there... Mars is just the beginning of mankind’s expansion in space.

This is a book for Aurovilians. It has been created by the same spirit that prevailed during the founding era of Auroville.

Peter



# 50 years on Victory of the Spirit 1971: The liberation of Bangladesh

For Claude Arpi, the Bangladesh Liberation War symbolises a promising uniting event. Claude is an Aurovilian, historian, and journalist, whose journey of historical discovery of Tibet, China, and the Subcontinent started with a visit to the Himalayas in 1972.

This book uses a carefully compiled collection of documents and reports to create a flowing and, at times thrilling narrative that allows the reader to better understand the events that led up to the liberation of Bangladesh.

Before its liberation, Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan, and because of the dictatorial regime that West Pakistan imposed there, millions of refugees flooded into India.

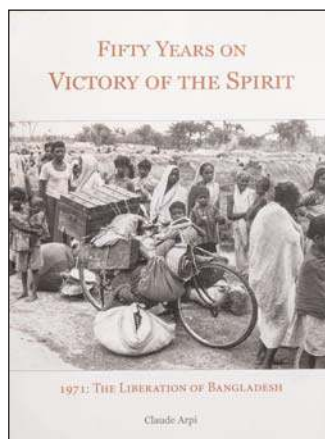
In the introduction, Claude quotes Sri Aurobindo's words from 1940. They were as valid then, for Bangladesh in 1971, as they are today: "It is in fact a clash between two world-forces which are contending for the control of the whole future of humanity. One force seeks to destroy the past civilisation and substitute a new one; but this new civilisation is in substance a reversion to the old principles of dominant Force and a rigid external order and denies the established values, social, political, ethical, spiritual, altogether. Among these values are those which were hitherto held to be

the most precious, the liberty of the individual, the right to national liberty, freedom of thought, even religious liberty is to be crushed and replaced by the subjection of religion to State control."

The book casts a new light on the topic of the Liberation of Bangladesh, by using an impressive array of data collected from different sources, including previously classified files from the National Security Archive (released in 2005).

Compared to other available historical books on the same topic, the author weaves in more depth and nuances. By drawing information from different levels he helps us understand the subject more integrally: from the spiritual level in the context of The Mother, Sri Aurobindo, and the Dalai Lama, to the intellectual impact on the global community through the solidarity of the famous French statesman André Malraux, to the hostile stance of the US and China, to the lesser known involvement of Tibetans in the fight for Bangladesh's freedom.

Spiritually, key personalities such as



Indira Gandhi, General Jacob, and Auroville's own General Tewari, received guidance through their contact with The Mother. General Jacob received a message from The Mother before the war: "India's Victory Assured. Very soon you will see some miracle." Thirteen days into the war, he

wrote the "Pakistani forces surrendered in Dacca... India had fought her battle alone."

Indira Gandhi, after the Liberation of Bangladesh, wrote to The Mother: "Through these critical months I have thought constantly of you. I can find no words with which to express my gratitude for your support. Your blessings are a great source of strength..."

The book criticises the US, the biggest force globally at play, who initially ignored the conflict and then eventually encouraged the Chinese to take action against India. The US had a vested interest in Pakistan because the latter was facilitating the former's communication with China, and the US was interested in developing trade with China.

Finally, the book talks about the Tibetan Army in India. Originally formed in the hope of one day liberating Tibet, the Force joined the fight, and was instrumental in the success of the operation, although no documentation exists to prove this fact: "The use of the Tibetan Force was the best guarded secret of the War..."

This is an important informative read for anyone - with or without prior knowledge on the topic. Certain topics that are addressed, such as the unity of India, her historical ties with Russia and the complexity of relationship with the US and China, make it a relevant book not just historically, but also to better understand and reflect upon the situations we are facing today, in Auroville, in India, and the rest of the world.

True diversity and solidarity was shown through Tibetans, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims all coming together and fighting on the Indian side for the freedom of Bangladesh.

As the author says: "In a way, the Liberation of Bangladesh was a small step forward towards a freer subcontinent, with all progressive forces of the planet joining in the struggle. For a greater 'unity', we still have to do a bit more."

Happy reading!

Chandra

## LETTERS

Dear friends,

Just received the April issue – heartfelt congratulations for continuing this work courageously and with so much care – and happened to read the article on the 40th anniversary of Auroville Press. Very interesting!

A small factual error in a statement of Claude's: "If that had a consequence for the Press, it was that we did not get the order to print the English transla-

tion of the 13 volumes of the Mother's Agenda. To our regret, it was printed at the Thompson Press in Chennai." First, it's "Thomson", not "Thompson" (though readers of Tintin will not mind the typo). Secondly, only the first volume of Mother's Agenda was printed there. All subsequent volumes, as far as I remember, were printed in the U.S.A. (not an ideal solution, but that's another story). Thomson Press printed Vol. 1 neatly, but forgot to laminate the cover, as a result of which many copies had patches

of discoloration in the course of time. Proof that bigger is not necessarily always better....

Warmly,  
Michel Danino

Reply from Claude Arpi  
Noted.

But it was so secret that we never got to know about the US. But I remember Patrice continuing to work with Thomson and Thomson...

Claude

## IN MEMORIAM



### Eric Ramanujam

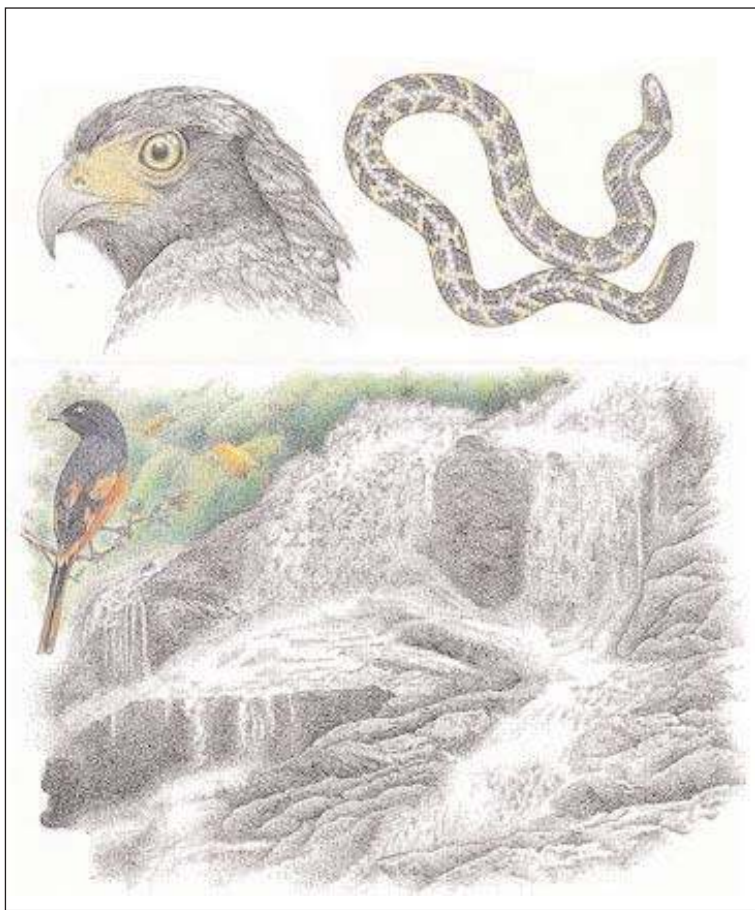
On 19 March, Eric Ramanujam passed away at the age of 58 in PIMS, where he had been taken due to advanced jaundice. Many of us know his beautiful and educative wild life stone paintings placed in Pitchandikulam, at the visitors walk way to

commercial scale. The collective has been successfully working with various government departments (such as the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust on the Adyar Eco Park and the Gulf of Mannar Biodiversity Reserve Trust), corporates like WIPRO Technologies and many NGOs. His detailed, gentle drawings, combining black and white ink with colour, are found in scientific articles, books and papers all over India. His contributions to nature art, science and his love for owls will live on.

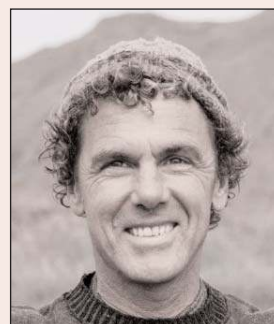
the Visitors' Centre, as well as at the toll plaza of the East Coast Road.

Eric had a background in the advertising industry, which he left because of the drudgery and deadlines which he, as junior staff, had to endure, and in 1997 took to auto-ecological / behavioural studies of the Indian Eagle Owl and associated nocturnal predators and prey. He authored *In Achilles' Footstep – Adventures with The Indian Eagle-Owl* with brilliant illustrations showing his in-depth knowledge of the owls of India.

He came to Auroville's Aranya wildlife resort in 2000, where he studied, drew and wrote about the Indian Horned Eagle for several years. Since 2002 he has undertaken field studies of the Kaliveli wetland complex near Pondicherry, the Adyar wetland complex in Chennai and the Sheavroy Hills of the Eastern Ghats. He later moved to Pitchandikulam where he was employed as a wildlife biologist. In Pitchandikulam he created an 'Art Collective' – a group of wildlife nature artists and illustrators working together to manifest outputs on a



### Axel Johann Björnsson



On February 14th, 2022, Axel Björnsson passed away in his home in Vilcabamba, Ecuador at the age of 59, after a long struggle due to a failed surgery. His body was cremated on the 19th of February in Loja, Ecuador, in the presence of his girlfriend, his sister, and oldest daughter. His funeral will take place in July, in the presence of his entire family in his home country, Iceland.

Axel joined Auroville in 2005 and was not only an enthusiastic actor in the Auroville theatre group but also a maths teacher at Transition School. He left Auroville in the beginning of 2013 for a new adventure in Ecuador, South America. This is where he built up his own business, a restaurant, which quickly became the place to be in town.

Axel was always a joyful and happy person and there are many moments of laughter he will be remembered by.

## Governing Board meets

On April 22nd, the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation held its 59th meeting. The meeting was attended in person by Dr. Nirima Oza, Shri. Aravindan Neelakandan, Prof. R. S. Sarraju and Dr. Seetharaman (OSD, Auroville Foundation). Chairman Shri R. N. Ravi and Prof. Goutam Ghosal and Secretary Dr Jayanti Ravi attended the meeting online. Dr. TAMILISAI Soundararajan, Prof. Nandana Gurappa Basappa and the two ex-officio members did not attend the meeting. The minutes of this meeting will be published soon.

## MoU signed

Through a Facebook post from the Central Public Works Department of the Government of India the community learned that it has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Auroville Foundation on March 15, 2022 for the execution of projects related to the making of the Auroville City. The content of the MoU has not been shared with the Auroville residents or its Working Committee.

## Centenary of The Mother's Return to Sri Aurobindo (1920-2020)

A documentary slideshow recounting the Mother's journey in Her own words from childhood till Her final arrival in Pondicherry has been made by the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education and can be seen at the <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdOn907PRBg>.

## SAIEN courses

The Sri Aurobindo Integral Education Network (SAIEN) is offering 11 courses. To celebrate Sri Aurobindo's 150th Birth Anniversary, various centres and institutions dedicated to Sri Aurobindo have come together to collaborate and offer courses. For registration, fee and details of the course please visit: <https://integratedu.in/courses/>

## Visit of Solanki's solar bus

Prof. Chetan S. Solanki, IIT Bombay and Brand Ambassador of Solar Energy Government of MP, also referred to as Solar Man of India or Solar Gandhi by the press, who has undertaken a world tour of 11 years in a solar bus to create a public awareness movement called Energy Swaraj Yatra (2020-2030) to spread the message of solar energy as it relates to climate change, visited Auroville on April 14 and 15 and interacted with many Aurovilians.

## Auroville Tomorrow

The 3rd issue of Auroville Tomorrow, the newsletter of Auroville Outreach Media now managed by the Auroville Foundation, is available from [mediainterface-avf@auroville.org.in](mailto:mediainterface-avf@auroville.org.in).

## AV Council meets with community

The Auroville Council held its first meeting with the community on its work over the past 14 months on Monday 18th April at the Unity Pavilion. Around 200 residents attended the meeting plus 70 online.

The Council members gave a presentation on their work and participated in an open question and answer session. The questions harvested during the meeting and the answers will be shared. The event can be seen at <https://youtu.be/qjPfwRMcm8>



# The adventure of Auroville was calling me

After many years of forward-thinking professional work and idealistic service, personal trials, and solo travels throughout rural Asia, English-born Helen chose to build the rest of her life in the City of Dawn, contributing her many skills and enthusiasm. She became an official Aurovilian in early 2021 and says "Auroville continues to fascinate me every single day."

I always felt there was something critical missing in my life. It just took me a while to figure out that what was calling me was the adventure of Auroville.

Growing up I had a sense that I was only living on the surface of life. I tried to fit into the world I was born into (in England) as best I could, but I felt stifled by the concrete environment, confused by a culture that valued money over people, and disorientated by an inner yearning for something more. It seemed like I had somehow forgotten or misplaced something of great value, like I was waking from a dream. Thankfully I had a kind, loving family who valued nature, encouraged me to question the world, and gave me the freedom and respect to explore who I am. As a teenager I spent hours searching for this elusive 'something more' in the occult section of the local library before branching out to philosophy books. I read all about meditation and was curious to learn more, but there were few opportunities for this where I grew up in Essex.

The nearest chance I got was when the Transcendental Meditation people came to town. However, the cost of their teachings was way out of my pocket money budget.

I was curious about what was missing not only at the individual level but also at a societal one – why people live together, how we govern ourselves, how we make decisions, how we care for each other, and what gives our life meaning. So I studied Social Policy at university. Then, later, I saw how the structures we create (our places and economies) also play critical roles in shaping the interactions between people, so I studied Urban Regeneration for my Masters degree.

For over a decade I worked for a government regeneration agency tasked to experiment with how we could create better, more sustainable places. This meant exploring how new and existing places could be designed to minimise their environmental impact, whilst having strong and resilient economies and high levels of social cohesion and wellbeing. My role was to discover what factors were critical to success and then weave these learnings into policy, procedures, guidance and training programmes. Incredibly this meant I was paid to travel and learn from so many interesting places and projects across the UK and Europe.

However, soon after I reached the age of 30 the long drawn out death of one of my closest friends and a complicated divorce meant I needed some time out of my life just to breathe. I quit the job that I loved and decided to head to India.

When I say 'decided' there wasn't much mental process involved. I simply let myself be guided by my instincts both to India and to Auroville – a place a colleague had read about and thought sounded 'quite interesting'.

This first trip to Auroville changed me deeply. I stayed in Aspiration, so now whenever I smell the Maroma incense it transports me back to that time.

At a mental level, I certainly found Auroville to be both interesting and intriguing. I encountered many new ideas, approaches and people which enabled me to look through fresh eyes. I was impressed by how a community could work together over decades to create something as incredible as the Matrimandir.

I was also curious how cities in the UK would be different if urban designers meditated on rooftops before meetings, opening themselves for divine inspiration as the Dreamcatchers did.

But the real change came at a much deeper level. On the morning of 21st February 2008 I received the news that my ex-husband had

died. I took this call on the balcony at Town Hall, staring out at the newly completed Matrimandir as I absorbed the words. I was not then aware that I was on a pivot point between my future and my past.

In processing the deaths of those two young beings who had been such a large part of my life I understood how essential it is to live your life according to the deepest truth you can find within. Not to be on the surface trying to fit other people's expectations and needs, or chasing after endless fleeting desires.

This was the time when I first encountered the teachings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and there was an immediate inner resonance.

However, it wasn't yet the time for me to stay. I was eager to see how I could bring some of these new-found learnings back to my previous world.

So I worked for another couple of years in London, mainly for a government think tank on sustainable development. We were a small team trying to convince Government ministers to learn from places like Auroville, encouraging them to fundamentally rethink the basis of the UK economy and take a more integrated and holistic approach to how we build, fund and govern our places.

Over this time I also worked as a policy advisor for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. I saw that whilst many new 'eco' buildings had been created, they often failed to deliver the intended impact. It seemed to me that this was often because whilst the physical form had changed, the consciousness of those who used the buildings and spaces hadn't.

Alongside this it was clear that whilst the technical and financing solutions to create better places were available, the real barrier was the inability of different people, organisations and belief systems to work together.

So I soon felt the calling to head back east to delve deeper within and to understand what is needed to create wider shifts in consciousness.

I had seen how much immersing myself in different cultures helped me to understand what parts of me are fabrications of society and where the truth really is. Putting myself in a different context, with different people time and time again, gave a real clarity.

So I meandered slowly alone by train from London to Beijing through Siberia and Mongolia, living with local people where possible. I spent the next few years moving between cultures and countries, learning and unlearning all I could.

One of the other places that touched me deeply in this time was Baba Amte's 'Anandwan' community which was forged out of much personal hardship, compassion and kindness to give a home and hope to the leprosy-afflicted. And also his son Prakash's 'Lok Biradari Prakash' project which provides healthcare and education to the Madia-Gond tribe, along with a home for orphaned animals.

During these times I often found myself back in Auroville ... and towards the end of my travels I met my now husband Kardash (a beautiful Russian-born Australian) in Pokhara, Nepal.

We travelled together and he also found a sense of resonance and belonging in Auroville. At some point we decided it was where we both wanted to be, although life somehow intervened and it was five years before we made the move.

During this time we mostly lived in Australia where I worked to reduce communi-



Helen

ty-level carbon emissions for a local municipality. This involved trialling new technologies and funding mechanisms to ensure that those in apartments and rental properties could benefit from solar.

We also explored how the negative health impacts of living in built-up areas during increasingly hot summers could be mitigated through building design and green infrastructure. In my spare time, I established a charity to promote the science of happiness and taught yoga and meditation.

Despite this interesting and super-rewarding work, the inner calling from Auroville to join the 'great adventure' was just too strong. So we moved here as pre-Newcomers in 2018.

I remember sitting under the Banyan Tree for New Year celebrations that first year unable to stop the tears pouring from my eyes. It felt like I was home. It's hard to describe, but for me Auroville is the only place in the world where I feel all parts of my being are truly aligned.

Much of Auroville fascinates me. This made it hard to decide where to focus my energies initially, but I felt the biggest learning opportunity (and where I hoped I could add value) was working with Koodam. So for my Newcomer period I joined Koodam, providing facilitation support for many meetings and processes. I enjoyed working with the team a lot and, as anticipated, it gave me an opportunity to see the community functioning from many different perspectives.

My mentor, Kathy, also recruited me (in my first few days as a Newcomer) to be part of a team exploring how a Citizens' Assembly process could have relevance for Auroville. This model has started to gain traction globally as an effective way to enable wide, diverse participation in community decision-making. It provides safe spaces in which participants can learn about complex ideas and through small group discussions can discover ways forward.

I'm forever grateful that I was invited to this team as I met many beautiful, passionate and inspiring Aurovilians, both in the organising team and in those who participated in the pilot Citizens Assembly. The Citizens Assembly model itself also seemed to work well and we learnt a lot about what type of topics it works for, the time and support needed, and how to present information in an understandable way. Lately, we have been able to utilise some of those learnings to support both the Dreamweaving and a participatory community budgeting process, too. I hope that the Citizens Assembly approach can evolve as one of many community decision-making tools in Auroville.

During the first lockdown I was grateful for the time and space to delve deeper into the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother through participation in the on-line Swadhyaya programme. It was a powerful experience to connect with students across India all eagerly exploring different aspects of the teachings.

Given my previous work on happiness, I was keen to focus my project on this aspect of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's teachings. I found there to be much correlation between the 'science' of happiness and Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's writings on this topic. However the science is still very limited in what it can measure, so the teachings provide a much richer, vaster, deeper wisdom.

Over the past year my energies have been mainly focused in exploring what the potential is for Auroville's projects to flourish and create a positive impact for Auroville, the bioregion and beyond. I worked on this project with Manjula and we were supported both by SAIER's research platform and Matthew and Binah (from AVI USA). This work saw us speak with almost 100 Aurovilians to understand what the potential is for Auroville's projects to grow, and what is holding them back. It was an incredible experience for me to meet so many people and hear about the diverse works they have dedicated much of their lives to.

I saw how the endeavours of Aurovilians and those who work alongside them had created innovative approaches and products in sustainable construction, alternative health, education, reforestation, renewable energy, as well as many local employment opportunities. I was impressed to see that several projects were working with India's leading companies to help them find solutions to their needs – and one was even exporting machinery to Elon Musk!

I also saw that it takes something really different to create a project in Auroville. As there is no ownership of projects, these people dedicate their time, passion and energy to their work. not to get rich, but instead to contribute to Auroville and somehow make a difference in the world. I saw such care, thought and devotion in these projects. From our exploration, we found that many of those teams who are interested in growing are held back by lack of skills, capacity and technical support. So we have established a new service unit – *Flourish* – which we hope will be able to provide support and build skills in this area.

On a personal level, I'm finding that Auroville can sometimes be very challenging, but in a way that keeps me on my toes. I am often pushed to reflect at a very deep level on who 'I' am, and who 'we' and 'they' are. Whilst the answers to this can be uncomfortable at times, I feel these reflections are a critical part of the work here if Auroville is to manifest a form of human unity which has a real relevance for the wider humanity. Auroville continues to fascinate me every single day. I feel lucky and inspired to be surrounded by so many people of such diverse backgrounds bound together through their passion to discover new ways to live.

Helen

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