

The Dreamweaving has begun!

The ‘Dreamweaving the Crown’ is part of a process which attempts to bring down to the ground the Galaxy and the Master Plan in the form of a *Detailed Development Plan* (DDP). The DDP, a framework within which Auroville can develop, will be done by the Vaastu Shilpa Foundation, Dr. Doshi’s planning office in Ahmedabad. For an office of their size and experience, doing a DDP for a city of 50,000 would normally be a fairly easy undertaking. But because Auroville is special, the dreamweaving sessions will provide an inspirational input to the process – albeit of an architectural / planning nature.

The exercise began recently with a three day workshop in which Aurovilians and those linked with Auroville with expertise in various fields presented information relevant to designing the Crown to participating architects. Topics covered included the Auroville Master Plan, the regional context, mobility, water studies, the electrical infrastructure, economy, urban forestry, Auroville’s forestation experience, ecological planning, land suitability analysis, development priorities, the science of Vaastu Shastra in town planning, International Zone planning, and the Green Belt land use plan. The Line of Goodwill team also outlined their concept, ATDC presented their work and the requirements of a *Detailed Development Plan* (DDP), and Rajeev Kathpalia from Vastu Shilpa Consultants – which have been approached to develop such a plan for Auroville – presented a few of their projects. (Some time later, there were also presentations on urban planning in relationship to Auroville’s economic ideals, and on city form and bioclimatic design).

The workshop, which was attended by the Secretary, demonstrated the huge expertise and practical experience the community possesses in many areas. It was much appreciated, not only by the architects, but also by many community members and even friends overseas who followed the presentations online (see below for links).

The dreamweaving architects then started work on their individual designs for different aspects or for the whole of the Crown, drawing from the presentations and technical resources. On 15th January they met for the first time and presented their initial explorations to each other. The next step, which happened on 21st and 22nd of January, involved them presenting their worked upon designs, and offering feedback on each other’s designs. Importantly, their feedback concentrated upon what they liked and were inspired by in each other’s designs.

The Dreamweaving architects then went away to work further on their concepts – with encouragement to ‘steal’ the best ideas of others or to work in teams. They may also consider ideas generated within the larger community. Subsequently in early February, they will present them to the other participants, to technical experts, peers, and randomly selected Aurovilians, to receive feedback before again ‘weaving’ these new ideas into their concepts.

The architects will present their final designs on 18/19th February. This will also be presented to the larger community in the birthday week for their evaluation, before being forwarded, along with all the final designs, to Vastu Shilpa Consultants as suggestions to inspire the DDP preparation.

The Citizens’ Assembly team is using the experience it has acquired in previous Citizens’ Assembly sessions to provide help with session design, facilitation, logistics, communication, budgeting, report writing, and other aspects of the overall organization.

Background

Dreamweaving emerged from a process which began in 2005. A group of architects who had been working independently on different sectors of the Residential Zone felt a need to develop common parameters for the Galaxy so that their work could be correlated.

As the group expanded to include not only architects but anybody interested, they began to look at more topics. At a certain point, simply brainstorming ideas evolved into something else. David Nightingale and Mona Doctor-Pingel, who have been intimately connected with the process from the beginning, explain.

“As we were meeting once a week from 6-8 am on different rooftops in Auroville, we were creating this energetic field,” explains David. “We realised we were having these magical experiences when, after getting bored with hearing our own and other’s voices, the silences got longer. And then, at some point, the magic happened: in this aspirational silence, somebody would say something that would click and we all knew, ‘This is what needs to happen’, and we became quite excited by what we could see emerging.”

One of them named this process ‘Dreamcatching’ to distinguish it from the more usual ‘brain storming’. For, unlike brainstorming, dreamcatching is a slow, non-argumentative, respectful, safe process designed to let go of our differing grounds to find the highest common factor.



Omar presents ancient city designs



Weaving discussions



Finalising a presentation



The dreamweavers present their initial ideas to each other

Over three years of regular sessions, many areas of Auroville were covered, including the International, Industrial and Residential Zones, the Crown, the Greenbelt and the entrances to Auroville, devoting about 12 weeks to each topic. “But at one point,” says David, “we realised we had all these pearls, these ideas, but now what? We could publish them, but that wouldn’t catch the energy essence of what we were doing.”

So, instead, they decided to create ‘Dream Spaces’ as an outreach to the wider community. In these spaces, all the dreamcatching outputs on a particular topic were pinned up on panels, and people were invited to comment upon them and add their own ideas.

“But then,” says David, “we were told we not doing anything beyond presenting ideas. So we decided to take up a particular topic, and work together to produce a design. This meant, of course, that only architects could be involved. So we gathered around a table and tried to design something together in real-time. And it was utter chaos!”

As an alternative, it was suggested that everybody take the parameters they had come up with for the task, go away for a week, and then each one would present their own design and receive feedback on it from the others. They would then go away again, with active encouragement to steal the best ideas of others, and ‘weave’ this into a revised design. This process would continue until a final design (or designs) emerged that was agreed upon.

‘Dreamweaving’ was born.

Mona points out that, over the years, Dreamcatching and Dreamweaving have seeded many new ideas and initiatives in the community.

The first time these new methods were used was as a design tool for the Integral Health Center. The dreamweaving process was also successfully used by three Auroville architects studios to ‘weave’ their concepts into a master plan for the Sustainable Livelihood Institute. And the winning team in The Garden of the Unexpected design competition used the process to integrate outputs from other teams to arrive at a successful synthesis.

The Crownways project (see Auroville Today 375, October 2020) was an even bigger dreamweaving project. It took the group about six weeks, involving about six attempts to come up with an agreed upon design. Like the present dreamweaving process for the Crown, there was a very strict time limit as 60 lakh rupees had been allocated for the first stretch of the Crown road, and the work was about to begin.

David cautions that dreamweaving is not a magic formula. “I won’t pretend it is easy. Sometimes somebody gets fixed upon a particular idea, even if the others don’t think it works. But regarding the present dreamweaving for the Crown, Doshi’s office will help in this because they are a neutral body and they don’t have to take everything we give to them. It’s as if we take a bunch of ingredients and, after four or five iterations, ‘cook’ them into a finished meal. Then we present it to them saying, ‘we like the taste of this’. But what they do with it, to what extent they use it for the DDP of the Crown, is up to them – after all, unlike most of us they are professional planners. However, as they are very interested in making this collective process work, hopefully the ‘flow’ between us will continue.”

Other options

Dreamweaving is a design process which is not suitable for every topic for it requires a working knowledge of design. However, David points out there are alternatives. For example, dreamcatching can be used for almost any topic, like generating new ideas about housing, the economy, education or the entry process.

‘Design café’ is another option which can involve non-specialists as well as architects. In the design café there are a number of tables. At each table, an architect or designer holds the space, making sketches of inputs from the other participants, who swap between the tables. The architects will then come together to see if a common design can be evolved.

“In other words, there is a toolbox which we can draw upon for different situations,” says David. “Each of these tools emerged from a specific need and unfolded over three or four years in answer to the basic question, how we can collaborate in a sensible and yet inspirational way?”

Alan

Online links for the presentations: Day 1: <https://youtu.be/RKf54NsnT4w> | <https://youtu.be/jRmJBA1bGeY>. Day 2: <https://youtu.be/YII3tLZNskg> | <https://youtu.be/yowLz0LSWFw>. Day 3 <https://youtu.be/GN8IL4CVM0Y> | <https://youtu.be/N4DKWiPPAFs> Additional presentations: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MOFq-QRvrE&authuser=0>

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The Secretary meets the community

On 31st December, the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Jayanti Ravi, invited the community to meet with her the next day when she would answer questions. It would also be an opportunity to talk “heart to heart”, as the Under-Secretary put it at the beginning of the meeting. She also invited members of the Auroville Town Development Committee (ATDC) to answer any questions relevant to their work.

Here are summarized extracts from the meeting. The order of some questions and responses has been changed to make the interactions more coherent.

Question: *Everybody has the right and privilege to participate in decision-making according to our Residents Assembly decision-making process. I noticed that the Town Development Committee recently stated that the Crown clearing process would continue underway regardless of the outcome. So the community decision-making process will be sidelined.*

ATDC: We are not sidelining, it is the opposite, we are honouring something that has been approved by the Residents Assembly not so long ago and that is what we call the Master Plan.

Secretary: If The Mother has given a plan why would I want to keep punching holes in it? Professor Doshi and others are saying that this plan that The Mother gave is contemporary and futuristic, so why are we questioning this? The Residents Assembly approved it with an overwhelming majority in 1999, so why do we delay the whole thing? Now is the time to rededicate ourselves and to make the city happen.

People fear that if somebody speaks out their visas might be cancelled. Will you cancel people's visas or deport them if tomorrow this trauma happens again and we are standing in front of JCBs? Or send them to prison if they are born in India?

Secretary: If we allow to happen what has been endorsed by all of us, why should there be fear? If we follow Indian law and procedures, currently we have four simple things to follow: the Constitution of India where obstructing any government servant or any of the teams doing their work is an offence under Indian law. It's also about respecting the Constitution of India, it's about respecting the Foundation Act, and the statutory gazette notification of the Master Plan.

Many of us have travelled abroad. When we go to any country abroad, do we respect the laws of the land, do we take the law into our hands? And yet let me tell you we have not and we do not intend to hold back any visas, but our behaviour also has to be exemplary so that not only people in and around Auroville, but everybody respects the kind of community we are.

The Governing Board met and decided various things about the construction of the Crown ways and the Master Plan. The Governing Board and its Chairman are the final authority, so why do we allow the obstructions that are going on?

Secretary: We are trying and we need the support of all of you. This is a plan that The Mother gave in 1968. That same plan has been ported into a Master Plan with the same drawings, but the nomenclature was changed. The plan that The Mother gave is being respected as sacrosanct.

ATDC: The topic of the clearing of the right-of-way started more than a year ago in talks and in general meetings. I think we had more than 50 talks with all the concerned people. This resulted in a survey. We made different proposals which were rejected and gradually we realised that whatever we did would not be quickly accepted. We realised that if we were to go on, we needed to do more than only talking.

The way that things have been happening gives us a very insecure feeling about what is going to happen in the future.

ATDC: This depends upon how we behave, how much we are aligned to the Charter. What happened happened with all due processes and if it feels like it was painful, it was because everything else was exhausted.

In the past there were Governing Boards and Secretaries, and there was a lot of elasticity. But suddenly this has disappeared and a big force is coming in. I wonder if this sudden development is going to be a continuous development, or is it just to do with the Sri Aurobindo's 150th year.

Secretary: Is this rapid development only going to be for the 150th year? The answer is in your hands. The town was founded in 1968. The government didn't want to come into it, but then there were conflicts and a group from here approached the government and requested them to take it over. From when the Master Plan was made, you had full freedom, but if it is not implemented by the community the Foundation Act clearly says the Governing Board shall ensure its implementation. So why do you give a chance for anyone else to intervene if you do things on time? If you are doing this, our role would simply be a catalyst and I would be happy to support you. But if things don't happen, we have to do what is expected of us to follow the law.

I worry about how the plans will be executed in the future. Who is going to do these developmental activities in the future, the community or somebody from outside? If it is someone from outside, I am really scared because they may not understand the way we live here.

ATDC: I do not draw a line between Aurovilians and non-Aurovilians. There is only Aurovilian behaviour. Whoever is living in the spirit of the Charter is welcome to work with us.

I understand that the Governing Board can call the shots if they feel the residents are not aligned. The Governing Board has made it very clear they feel the Residents Assembly is unable to make large decisions and they feel the need to push them through. However, I am concerned that there has been complete radio silence from the Working Committee, and from the Town Development Council. There was no posting that the JCBs were coming that day and the legal position was never explained. It seemed that vehicles came and started cutting trees without prior intimation to the community. I'm puzzled why there was no prior information for such an important step. Was it an oversight because things were happening so fast, or was it deliberate? And will there be a change going forward if we continue with fast development?

ATDC: Things happened quite speedily and during that period we lost two or three members from the TDC. I agree that we should have taken more effort to communicate but we did not have all the possibilities to do it at that moment.

Secretary: I agree we could have been a little bit more tech savvy, but the fact is that this decision to create the Master Plan was declared in 2010, and even in 2012 all the Working Committee members have signed they agreed to it. If anything, I think there's been an overdose of communication in the six months I have been here. We have had over 50 meetings, not only my office, but we also went to the Youth Centre and Darkali.

I am for the city but I was deeply hurt by the way it is happening. Because this place is mainly about human unity, and we cannot split the community by bringing the police here. Mother said clearly no police, and there has to be space for our community processes because they create human unity. Please find a compromise and offer our youth something in exchange before the bulldozers come if you want to create unity here.

Secretary: The Mother did say no police and we respect this. However, these buildings in the Youth Centre were unauthorised buildings. We should not take the law into our hands and build something in the middle of what was intended. When it started, the work was done in broad daylight. We have all the evidence that there were children, women, babies, being thrown on the JCBs and we had to call in the police to restrain people from hurting themselves. Yet the work came to a grinding halt. Senior officers suggested continuing the work in the evening when there would be no residents there, and children and women would not

be coming to stop the work, so that is how it was done. In any other part of India, if there is a cable that has to be laid, even if it has to go through your own land, you would not be allowed to stop it. And here the land is owned by the Foundation, we are all stewards.

I've never seen this community so split, in pain. For me, building a city involves the humans first, and I think our present planning is lacking that. The Dreamweaving team made a presentation that was very collaborative and hopeful. Will you allow this process to take its full power and stop the JCBs entering Auroville in early January so we can have peace to collaborate?

Secretary: It's in our hands. Why do we not want to respect something that the whole community has decided? I hear beautiful instances about how the Matrimandir was built: everybody was involved. Can't we get our young people involved in planting trees rather than obstructing vehicles which have to do their work? If we all joined this process, it could result in a beautiful transformation, not just of brick, gravel and sand but also of consciousness. Can't we have weekly sessions or some way in which we can raise our collective consciousness? Because as The Mother has said, this is not a city that is going to be built on the outside. The more we plumb into the inside, the city will get built.

The Dreamweaving process began about four months ago and we have been having conversations since then with Omar and David and Professor Balakrishna Doshi. This is going on and we want all of you to participate as this is a very nice professional way of doing things.

The Master Plan does allow flexibility but not for the basic things. If you're designing a house, you can decide the kitchen is here and the toilet is here. But you don't decide to put the toilet in the kitchen: that is not the flexibility we are talking about.

So we have to respect the basic layout, but the Dreamweaving has infinite possibilities to design what happens within those spaces. The Dreamweaving will go on, but the other work will also go on and the Dreamweaving will help us realise all those elements of the Crown we want to have.

ATDC: I beg to differ when we say we have first to create human unity and then build the town because why, when Mother founded Auroville, did she ask an architect to come up with a plan, and then give a Charter and policy decisions about how things had to happen? Mother created L'Avenir, and the Foundation translated this into an official body, the ATDC, which is legally accepted by the Government of India.

What is the strategy regarding the Crown? Some land Auroville has not been able to buy is on the line of the Crown Road. I was expecting that this process would start with purchasing this land. Also, still I don't think there is a mobility plan for Auroville. So what are the planned roads for, for cycling, for walking, for buses, for cars? This also needs to be clarified.

Secretary: A mobility plan is being worked out. We sent a proposal for land acquisition to the Government in September. The question the Government is asking, you have already grabbed about 3000 acres of land and there are only about 3000 of you, what is the justification for us to give more? So we have to tell them that our intention is not to be a land grabber, but to be truthful about the purpose for which we got the land. If we do what we have to do, we can morally show we have come here to be beacons for the rest of the world.

I want to correct a certain narrative about the Master Plan meetings. It was a beautiful collective movement in which people from all walks and all visions participated to protect the land for Auroville. On 28th July, 1999 we managed to have it approved by almost 100 members of the Residents Assembly. There was only one dissension. But there was a caveat. It was clarified that the document is aimed more at the protection of the Greenbelt and, apart from the zoning, does not give detailed proposals for the development of the city area. It said the more detailed planning would be an ongoing process and all interested were wholeheartedly encouraged to partic-

ipate. On this basis, the Master Plan profile, which was different from the final document sent to the Government of India, was approved.

Another resident: This is correct regarding the July 1999 meeting. But the July Master Plan was not accepted by the Governing Board who sent it back saying we had to do a better job. This Plan was the one the Residents Assembly approved in December, 1999, and it contained the Crown, the radials and the outer ring road.

According to me, the final Master Plan that was approved by the government is not written in stone. It doesn't mean that everything that is mentioned has to be implemented exactly as it is written there. Actually the ATDC has already made a change by making the Crown way much smaller, and I think that other adjustments are also possible. So my plea is not to consider it as a Bible but as a guideline which helps us to come together and work for the development of the city.

ATDC: There are three layers of the Master Plan. One is the preamble, another is the legal aspects, and the third thing is suggestive aspects. The right-of-way measurement is mentioned as suggestive so we had the opportunity to reduce it. But it is clearly said that the Crown, the circularity of the Crown and the Zones cannot be changed. There was also an RA mandate for the TDC in 2007 which clearly says we are not to go against all these things. It says the Crown and the Zones are key elements, and the responsibility is given to the TDC to ensure that these things are implemented. We as members of the ATDC have a certain mandate and a certain role to perform and we would be failing not only the community but also the Government if we do not do it. It is our dharma.

I wonder why you started the Crown work by focusing on critical areas like the Youth Centre, rather than clearing the way in undisputed areas. Why was there not more time given to the youth to come to an agreement with you? I have a clear feeling that if you had given us one week we could have come to an agreement and implemented what is there now, but in a very peaceful manner.

ATDC: The work did start in the least contentious area in 2009 with the first paving of the Crown. We went from area to area where there was no contention and that's where it stopped. The only places left for the Crown at present are the communities of Bliss, Darkali, Center Field, and the lands we don't have.

It's been framed that the people who are opposing what is going on at the moment are against the city and I don't think that is true. Secondly, we talk about Mother being very explicit in her plans and we have a detailed plan which Mother gave us. I don't think that's true. I'm familiar with what Mother said about Auroville in discussions with Satprem, Roger, Paolo etc. and the only thing I am aware of where Mother said 'no' to other people's suggestions, because she had seen it, was with the structure of the inner chamber of the Matrimandir. Everything else was open to discussion; what she didn't see she was willing to yield to the experts. So to say that Mother said the Crown had to be like this is nonsense as far as I'm concerned. She approved the plan that Roger gave her but it is not written in stone. If we could stop framing this as an 'us' against 'them', as some for Mother and some against Mother, or for the city and against the city, we might have a chance to move forward.

ATDC: Mistakes have been made and we should learn from them, but mistakes are not only made by the ATDC. Mistakes happen everywhere. When we take steps boldly, mistakes are bound to happen. Perhaps we have waited 53 years because we wanted to take every step perfectly. In my view, what is happening at present is surgery, and it is unfortunate that we have come to this level.

Compiled by Alan

The meeting can be followed at <https://youtu.be/MRiMbubfvio>

Indebtedness in Auroville

In the last two years, six Aurovilians (two individuals and a family of four), took their lives because of personal issues including being heavily indebted. Can Auroville do anything to prevent such tragedies from happening in future?

Money lending and borrowing are customary and widespread in Tamil Nadu. For decades, small farmers have been borrowing money from money lenders, because their lands are too small to generate a sufficient income to cover the needs of their families and set money aside for buying seeds and fertilizers for the next season. Small farmers can't go to banks as they usually don't have any collateral to pledge against loans. Also, the time required to get a bank loan is a hindrance. During the farming season, farmers often need credit at a very short notice. The road to money lenders is then the only option.

Borrowing money has also become quite customary in towns and cities, including in Auroville. The executive of one of Auroville's units recently investigated how much money in loans his 20 employees had taken, thinking that if the total would be around one lakh, he might be able 'to do something about it'. The answer was unexpected. "Altogether they owed more than 32 lakhs, so the idea 'to do something about it' went out of the window," he said. Asked why people had taken out such large loans, he learned that it was for building or repairing a house, for the education of a child, to purchase a motorbike, to tide over emergencies such as medical expenses, or for a change of social status. "People desperately want to do better, seeing the lifestyle of others around them or on television." The breakdown showed that about 40% was borrowed from banks, 25% came from vatti loans, 12% from pawning a personal possession, such as a gold ornament; 13% by participation in chit funds; and another 10% from participating in a micro credit fund.

The vatti loans

Amongst all the loan types, *vatti* loans are widespread. The practice, however, can easily have vicious consequences as the interest charged is usually far above the legally permitted interest of 12% a year.

Vatti loans are special as there is no requirement to repay the main sum at any fixed time. It is common practice that a person borrows, say, Rs 5,000, on condition of paying an interest of Rs 250/month and repaying the main sum 'whenever possible'. If an interest payment is missed, the amount will be added to the main sum. So if someone skips interest payments for 10 months, the main sum will be increased by 10 x Rs 250 plus the compound interest due on each non-payment. In this way these loans become debt traps. They are called "*kandhu vatti*", a Tamil word which translates as usury. Yet, many borrowers, many of them illiterate, are happy to take out these loans. They are unaware that, as in this example, they effectively pay 5% interest per month.

Kandhu vatti loans come in many varieties. One is the *vaara vatti*, the weekly loan, which often attracts more than 25% interest. It is usually taken by daily workers, such as agricultural and construction workers, who do not possess any assured source of income. Then there is the *daily vatti*, interest to be paid on a daily loan, habitually taken by small entrepreneurs such as vegetable or flower vendors who borrow Rs 1,000 in the morning and have to pay back Rs 1,100 by evening – the 10% interest a day translates to nearly 300% a month, or about 3,600% interest a year. This *daily vatti* also happens when a poor person needs some food from the local shop but cannot pay; food is then given on the condition that the money is repaid that same evening, plus interest. Lastly, there is *hourly vatti*, an interest calculated on an hourly basis.

The consequences of a continuous repayment default can become

unbearable for the borrowers. Often, they get harassed, suffer verbal abuse or even violence, and are asked for surety, like having to surrender their land documents or possessions such as vehicles. These are then used to coerce them to repay the loans plus interests on the lenders' terms, failing which they are taken over. The borrower, seeing no way out, alone, or sometimes with his entire family, commits suicide.

In 2003, after a series of suicides linked to usurious debt, the state enacted the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Charging Exorbitant Interest Act to safeguard borrowers from harassment and violence by moneylenders. The law, along with the Moneylenders Act, which prohibits charging of interest above 12%, was meant to put an end to usurious lending by treating usury as a criminal offence and imposing hefty punishments on the harasser, such as imprisonment and fines. Yet, these laws are known to have had little effect and the practice continues unabated. In Auroville, some Aurovilians have admitted to giving loans at a rate of at least 2% a month to fellow Aurovilians and Auroville employees.

The chit funds

Participation in a chit fund is another way to get quick access to money and is equally widespread. A chit fund has a fixed number of participants, each of whom agrees to pay every week or every month a certain sum to the fund for a fixed period. The chit is the full amount collected each month. So if the fund has 10 people, the duration of the fund will be 10 months. If each person pays Rs 5,000 a month, a chit is Rs 50,000. A participant can receive the chit at any time during the term of the fund, even though the participant has not yet paid his or her full share.

To receive the chit, there is an auction. The participants 'bid' to get the chit, and that bidding goes in the form of agreeing to get less than the full chit of Rs 50,000, say Rs 40,000 or Rs 30,000, so the participant loses Rs 10,000 or Rs 20,000. That amount is then added to the chit fund and is later equally divided between all participants, including the person who received the reduced chit.

When does someone agree to forfeit the full sum? This happens when there is a real emergency, like a hospital treatment, educational expenses, or family celebrations, such as a marriage. But there are also cases where a participant deliberately takes the chit for a lesser amount to lend out that money as a vatti loan and so generate more income than if he or she had received the full chit.

There are also people who join a fund purely for making money. They have no need for a chit and can wait till the end of the chit fund period, and then get an extra income from the money left over in the fund by the participants who had agreed to take less than their full share. Some even join a chit fund knowing that some other participants will soon have a real need and therefore are likely to agree to take out a lesser amount. Then they'll get their Rs 50,000 + all the benefits from the auctions. In this way, they can easily make extra money. The flaw of the auction system is that people with true needs will come out with less money than they've put in, while those who have no need, such as a money lender who only joins to get more capital for his next usurious loans, will benefit.

The foreman (the organizer) of the chit fund is in a special position. There are many ways in which s/he gets a cut. It can be in the form of a percentage or a fixed sum. S/he can also be entitled to receive the first chit for the full amount, and is then supposed to keep that money aside, in case someone doesn't pay up. The foreman is also responsible for maintaining the accounts, collecting all

the monthly installments and keeping them properly – usually in a home safe or cupboard – and not investing any of this money for personal gain, e.g. by giving out vatti loans. But the temptation to go for the quick extra buck is high; some foremen even organize second auctions for the money left over when someone takes out less than the full chit. In those cases, the maths gets very complicated and there often are fights. And if a foreman makes a wrong decision, and loses the money entrusted to him/her, a suicide may follow easily. This appears to have been the case with the Auroville family.

To prevent abuse and regulate chit funds, in 1982 the central government passed the Chit Funds Act. This act declares as illegal any chit fund that is not sanctioned or registered and puts conditions on the operation of approved chit funds, such as that a foreman has to deposit the chit money with an official bank. In the Auroville area, this does not happen. The manager of the State Bank of India in Kuilapalayam, one of the most prominent banks in the area, stated that his bank maintains no chit fund accounts. All chit funds in the Auroville area are unregistered, and as such, illegal.

Microcredits

The Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has successfully managed to tackle the problems of vatti loans and chit funds by setting up a microcredit scheme under its corpus fund. This has proven to be an excellent way to improve the lives of the rural poor. Loans are given for housing, repayment of usurious loans, social functions, agriculture, education, small business, and medical costs. AVAG has also been stimulating its women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to start their own micro-financing activities. The members club together their savings and jointly take all decisions, such as the interest to be paid on deposits, which member to give loans to, and what the conditions for loan repayment are. Monitoring is done by AVAG, which keeps track of all the financial transactions of the SHGs. With the help of this monitoring, the microfinance activities have been very successful, with a loan repayment rate of almost 100%. AVAG also assists participants of SHGs to get bank loans for agriculture, businesses, housing, education, and other critical needs. The work of AVAG has resulted in a dramatic reduction of the number of suicides due to indebtedness: from 8-10 a year before the schemes started, to less than two in the recent years. Yet, AVAG's work it is still not sufficiently known. One of its executives expressed her frustration that people who could have been member of a women's SHG, still take vatti loans, as they are not aware of the micro credits being available.

The situation of Auroville's employees

The micro credits and assistance from AVAG are only available for people living in the surrounding villages who are members of a Self-Help Group. Many of Auroville's employees do not qualify. But those working in Auroville units are either enrolled in the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) [if the unit employs 20 people or more, eds] or in Auroville's Small Employees Welfare Administration scheme, SEWA. Under these schemes, an employee has to pay a certain contribution towards the scheme and an equal contribution is paid by the employer. On retirement, at attaining 55 years, the employee gets a lump sum amount consisting of the contributions of the employer, the employee and the interest on both.

Though these schemes are meant to

take care of an employee's post-retirement needs, both permit access to the savings during the course of employment. Such withdrawals, which are treated as 'advances' and not loans, are allowed only under specific situations – buying a house, repaying a home loan, medical needs, education or marriage of children. The amount that can be taken as an advance will depend on the specific situation, the number of years of service, etc. As the advance is not a loan, no interest is due and no repayment is necessary. However, as an advance diminishes the lump sum available on retirement, it is advisable that the participant voluntarily repays the advance.

Another possibility would be that the employees in a unit start their own micro credit scheme, similar to what is being done by the SHGs, and accept the oversight of the employer. The advantage of doing a micro credit scheme under the umbrella of a workplace would be that the salary and saved funds under EPF or SEWA could serve as insurance for the loan repayment. But no Auroville unit has as yet implemented such a scheme.

The Aurovilians

Aurovilians do not participate in social welfare schemes such as the EPF or SEWA as those schemes are for employees only. Many Aurovilians also lack old-age financial security. This might get resolved when the Silver Fund, a pension scheme for long-term Auroville residents over the age of 70, takes effect. [Its modalities are still being studied by the FAMC, Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee – the study was interrupted because of COVID, eds.]. But how can Aurovilians cover immediate needs that cannot be paid from their monthly maintenance? How can Auroville stop Aurovilians from taking vatti loans or participating in chit funds?

It is not well-known that Aurovilians who work full-time for Auroville can get financial support from Auroville, for which the FAMC has set up a financial support group. Financial support, to a maximum of Rs 30,000, may be given for the purchase of basic household goods, to cover costs of education of one's children, to cover expenses related to the treatment of health issues of oneself and one's immediate family members (parents, children, partner), to cover emergency travel expenses, and to purchase a cycle or electric vehicle for oneself or for one's partner or child. The support group will assess the applicant's ability to repay the support given and fix the terms of repayment. If considered necessary, support may be given on condition that one or more persons or an Auroville unit guarantee the repayment. Generally, repayment is to be done within 12 months from the date the support has been provided.

Psychological support and awareness creation

So there are ways for an Aurovillian or an Auroville employee to access funds without having to take a vatti loan or participate in a chit fund. But awareness needs to be created, and those who are trapped in the clutch of money lenders need help. Yatra Srinivassan, a Kuilapalayam-born film director who has produced many educational films and street plays on social, health and environmental issues, has agreed to make a film on the dangers and illegality of vatti loans and chit funds, if Auroville can cover the costs, estimated at Rs 2 lakhs (US\$ 2,700). Matram, Auroville's centre for psychological support, continues to be available for counselling Aurovilians and Auroville employees who have financial problems and suffer harassment and psychological trauma. It is a beginning.

Carel

Governing Board meets

The Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation held a meeting at Auroville on January 18th. Members of the International Advisory Council submitted their views on-line. From newspaper reports the Auroville residents learned that the Board had unanimously reaffirmed its stand to continue with expeditious implementation of the Auroville Township as per the Master Plan.

Working Committee presentation to GB

Three members of the Working Committee discovered that the other four members had submitted a presentation to the Board bypassing them, which, they say, had "errors of judgement and facts and was undermining the role of the Residents' Assembly". Their views and corrections were shared with the Board.

Senior Aurovilians presentation to the GB

Six senior Aurovilians presented to the Board their account of the last two months, challenging some of the narratives of failure and stagnation, and how differences within Auroville have deepened since the current Secretary arrived.

Residents' Assembly decides

In a well-attended meeting of the Residents' Assembly (RA) held on January 2nd, a proposed decision to be made by the RA (RAD) was formulated:

To pause all clearing, infrastructure laying and permanent construction work on the Right of Ways of Crown, Radials and Outer Ring in order to enable the community to define a way forward for Auroville's development, following collective processes, the 'Master Plan: Perspective 2025' framework, and other relevant regulations.

This formulation was approved by 397 persons while 24 residents were against it. On January 4th, the Universal Township Group launched a petition to invalidate both the RAD and the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) team who were described as 'dysfunctional' and 'driven by personal opinion'. 115 people signed the petition, though later some withdrew. The next day, a counter petition to support the work of RAS was launched. Within a day it received over three hundred signatories. The RAS started the decision making process on January 9th. It lasted till January 25th. On January 26th, the RAS announced that the RA had decided to accept the proposal. 899 valid votes had been submitted. 803 Aurovilians supported the proposal, 96 Aurovilians did not.

Visa declaration

On January 7th, a form was circulated to be signed by foreigners needing a visa recommendation from the Secretary, Auroville Foundation, which stated amongst others that the signatory agreed to 'Abide by the Master Plan of Auroville, based on the Galaxy Plan conceived by the Mother and gazetted by the Government of India, based on which the Auroville City will be developed and built', and 'I hereby state that I will in no way or form, obstruct or hinder its manifestation. In the event of breaching this agreement of understanding, the Auroville Foundation can take any action as may be deemed necessary'. The Working Committee subsequently clarified that this was a pilot/draft to get a pulse of what will be the most appropriate version and that the declarations signed by about 20 people so far stand cancelled.

The Art and Craft of Catching Water in Auroville



Water has always been at the centre of Auroville's story. The land sits on the ridge of the only plateau in the 740 sq. km. Kaliveli watershed area. One side slopes down to the sea, and the other to a poorly-maintained system of interconnected village tanks. Beginning around 1500 years ago, the region's kings and rulers had the wherewithal and foresight to integrate an extensive network of catchment tanks (*eris*) connected by water channels into the development infrastructure of the times. This improved the soil and allowed for denser human settlement in a region with no perennial rivers and short seasons of extreme rains. A complex eco-system – including forests, small-scale agriculture, and people – thrived. But the system and cycles completely broke down under colonial rule, and resulted in the severe erosion that Auroville's first settlers, assisted by local villagers, worked so hard to reverse.

Through trial and much error, new arrivals to the denuded plateau learned that planting and tending to saplings was not enough. Given the natural slope of the land, the soil and plants would all wash away in the course of just one intense rain. The canyons in and around Auroville were deep wounds in the land, bleeding red soil into the

sea. To best retain water and stop erosion, work had to start at the very top of the slope. Soil bunds, or embankments, had to be sculpted along the contours of the land and stabilized with vegetation. But the land can only absorb so much water at a time, so ponds of different sizes had to be dug at strategic points downhill. As one pond fills, water is channeled to the next, and the next. The long, deep canyons at the bottom have – over decades – been transformed by Aurovilians into large catchment areas through check dams of various sizes. To Auroville's east, the goal is to stop rainwater from running off to the sea. To the west, the water is channeled into the pre-existing village tanks. And as this water percolates, ground water is slowly recharged.

After 53 years, there is still much work to be done in the city area to systematically ensure zero surface water run-off. In 2021, close to three metres of rain fell in Auroville, more than twice the annual average, and most of it over a short period of time. The canyons could not contain the additional volume. Before the rains had even ended, Kireet – Auroville's de facto pond landscaping expert – began receiving calls for advice from communities in low-lying areas where homes and roads had been flooded.

Until now, it has largely been left to individual

land stewards to figure out what needed to be done to manage surface water, and to find the financial and technical resources to do it. Kireet has personally planned and overseen water harvesting structures in Utility, Aspiration, and Auromodele Canyons; hundreds of new catchments in other communities; and desilting or improvements in countless ponds. Auroville units Harvest and Palmyra have also rehabilitated a number of village water tanks and channels in the bio-region. But this is just not enough.

Over the last twenty five years, numerous studies and reports published by, for, and in collaboration with Auroville have all sounded increasingly urgent alarms. Comprehensive strategy and integrated water management systems are crucial for water security in Auroville and the bio-region, with catchment ponds highlighted as an essential component of a holistic system.

The immediate threats are multiple. Exponential population growth and irrigated agriculture in the area have led to massive over-exploitation of groundwater resources. Referring only to Auroville and its immediate surroundings, Auroville's Prashant Hedao (GIS specialist) estimates ground water usage is roughly 30 times what is recharged. The depleted aquifers are in immediate danger of salt water intrusion, both from the sea

and from older, deeper aquifers. There is constant risk of water contamination due to agricultural fertilisers and pesticides, construction, and a dense population with inadequate sewage systems. Extreme weather conditions – including flood, drought, and deadly heat – now seem to occur at regular intervals.

In this water-stressed context, which is echoed across Tamil Nadu, every water body is an asset. The Madras High Court has, in several 2021 rulings, repeatedly directed the Tamil Nadu Government to protect existing water bodies, along with forests, "so that future generations find the state habitable and can survive here." In response, the Tamil Nadu Registration Department has issued a registration ban to prevent encroachment and development on existing "waterbodies, waterways, water catchment areas, and associated Government poramboke [unclassified] lands."

Recent news and events seem to indicate that Auroville has arrived at a potential turning point in its physical development as a city. Perhaps this is also a very real opportunity to create a working model for protecting water catchments and catchment areas as part of a holistic water management strategy for the city and bio-region, within a holistic development framework.

Gita

The Darkali Water Catchments: Integral Features of an Eco-Intelligent Urban Park

35 years ago, much of the land intended for Auroville's future Mahasaraswati Park, located near to the Town Hall, still belonged to neighbouring Kottakarai village. All of it was degraded, with extremely poor soil quality. Intent on "doing something for Mother, in the spirit of Auroville," Krishna, Agnes, and Gopal began digging, planting, and bunding. Of the three, only Krishna had experience on the land. But the work was, "relatively simple," says Gopal. "Imagine that it's completely barren. You just look, you see there's a slope, so you start your grid work to stop the monsoon rains from washing away topsoil."

After the first year, using the money Gopal got from selling his guitar, they dug a borewell, installed a hand pump, plonked three simple cots on the site, and began living on the land in what is now known as Darkali Forest. Each time Auroville acquired more lands in the vicinity of the future park, the Darkali fences would be repositioned along the new boundary. For the first 15 years, the stewards "basically worked every day with the limited tools and means we had...to bund the whole place and to slowly start a bit of water catchment." Through increasingly intricate bunding and landscape features, enough water was held on the land to nourish the growing trees through the dry season.

Darkali Canyon

But gaining access to the canyon was the game-changer. When Auroville purchased the plots adjacent to the canyon (located on *poramboke*, or unclassified public land), it suddenly became possible for the stewards to envision water harvesting and ground water recharge on a much larger scale.

The land on the west side of Auroville slopes from two directions (east and south) to form a major gully at the Darkali canyon. According to Prashant Hedao, a resident GIS expert, the water from more than 60% of the area inside the Auroville Crown drains through Darkali during the monsoons. While the canyon is not extremely deep, it is long. The canyon's overflow travels behind Kottakarai, out through Alankuppam and connects finally to the Kaliveli wetlands 10 kilometres north of Auroville. Technical reports and water strategy recommendations stress that this is a sensitive area for water catchment and recharge strategies, both for Auroville and the sub-watershed (covering approximately 135 sq. km.).

The stewards began constructing earth dams in the canyon at key points using, says Gopal, their "tiny, little means" and every year building "a little higher, a little stronger, a little better." They made bunds and planted around the canyon to stop erosion.

From 1991, a Tamil Nadu rain water harvesting scheme began making funds available for check dams in key locations. At some point, a government contractor arrived and announced that he was to



make some small stone dams in the canyon. The quality of the work was such that these dams fell apart within a few years. Still, two good things came of the experience: government recognition of Darkali's potential as a water harvesting area, and a treasure trove of free stones that the stewards could now reuse to build solid spillways for earthen dams.

The stewards subsequently built three major dams and two minor ones with the re-purposed stones, and they deepened the water catchment areas upstream of the dams. But there was one last, most important dam that kept getting washed away. The topography was complicated, and there was too much sand underneath the structure.

Bobcat in Darkali

When a bobcat mini excavator was acquired about 15 years ago, Darkali was finally able to dig its way out of previous difficulties. The stewards started with the existing dams and catchment ponds, increasing height, width, and area. For the fourth major dam, they dug out all of the sand, started with a proper earth foundation, and then built the dam up layer by layer. A huge water catchment area was excavated.

From the forested park down to the canyon, rainwater run-off is now slowed by a virtual maze of aesthetic landscape features. The overflow from each feature is guided into another area, and another, until all of the water is guided into the catchment area of the fourth dam. On an average year with 1.4 metres of rainfall, Darkali sees almost zero runoff from its 50 acres, and an estimated 4 million litres of water are harvested.

Park Boundaries

Before Auroville architect Roger Anger passed away, he had agreed with the Darkali stewards on an updated Galaxy concept Plan that enlarged the boundaries of the designated green area. Gopal explains that in the previous version, this was "too small a strip for a meaningful park" and ended 50 metres before the canyon. The new boundaries, including the canyon, were finalized on paper by the Town Planning group of the time, and officially signed in 2009.

Crown Road and Right of Way

Over the years, there have been multiple markings and surveys for the Crown Road. Darkali's stewards have regularly sought clear indications of where the road would pass, and have kept the dedicated strip of land free of major plantation in order to accommodate it. In 2012, the Technical Design Study of the Crown Road (commissioned by Auroville) plainly stated the need for an Environmental Impact Assessment of sensitive areas – defined as canyons, water recharge areas, and Bliss / Darkali Forests – along the road's projected path. This has yet to be done.

Amidst the recent initiative to kickstart Auroville's stalled urban infrastructure development, the projected Right of Way (ROW) for the Crown Road was newly mapped as a 16.7 metre wide, perfectly circular corridor. In Darkali, this would mean ploughing straight through and filling in the largest, most important water harvesting structures, as well as clearing and eventually paving over much of the intended park area. Darkali's stewards have proposed a 2 metre shift back to the strip of land previously marked, which would still keep the route within the overall 30 metre ROW and would safely preserve the water harvesting structures and capacity. Since this section of the road would pass through a forested park, the width of the road together with a single infrastructure corridor could reasonably be kept at seven metres.

Ignoring this proposal, the long pending environmental assessment, and the need for official notice, bulldozers were sent to Darkali on 9 December to begin clearing the ROW. A significant number of trees were destroyed before a Stay Order from the National Green Tribunal came into effect on the afternoon of 10 December. But the water catchments are so far still intact, still full of precious water, and slowly allowing that water to percolate into the soil for the benefit of this entire bioregion.

Many of Auroville's residents are newly hopeful that these recent events will ultimately open up a different way forward, one where ecologically important areas like Darkali can be intelligently and sensitively incorporated into the urban fabric. Isn't that just the kind of city the Earth needs?

Gita

Through a glass brightly

Robert L'Heureux's last glass works exhibition from January 7 marks the swansong of his career as a glass worker. Eleven large pieces, some well over a yard in diameter, were shown in Centre d'Art for two weeks.

Some of his pieces have an unexpected amount of movement in them, with often spiraling circles bursting in a type of dynamic planetary expansion. Titles such as 'Quasar', 'Neutron', and 'Cosmic Egg', allude to what Robert senses as the "immensity of the universe" and he brings to one of the most static art forms a pulsing multidimensionality. Other pieces like 'River' or 'Blue', a collage of masses of small squares were initially inspired to recycle small pieces and weave together a glass flow. Some pieces have an opalescent cloudiness, with no colour, just different transparencies separated by the leading.

Robert's history with this art form goes back to 1979 when he started in his native Quebec to learn to work with glass. It was for him a *'coup de coeur'* a 'call of the heart' immediately. He felt that glass greeted him: "I know you, old friend". He started his own glass shop, but tired of the commercial aspect of the business. After eight years or so he switched to the café and restaurant trade, but kept his tools and would make occasional pieces for individual orders.



PHOTOS: AUROVILLE/ENKATESH

Historically, stained glass was used for religious art in churches and cathedrals, but in the late 19th century Louis Comfort Tiffany started to make glass for art's sake. Robert continues this tradition, though his pieces also have an evolutionary and spiritual feel to them.

He moved to Auroville nine years ago and "had a dream to reopen a workshop without economic pressure. I was guided, it was so strong with synchronicities, to open a workshop here. It felt like a divine plan." For Robert "glass is a guru; so many times when I was working with glass I was also working on myself." He mentions that working with glass in his studio can be blissful, a "symbiosis with glass as my teacher," and that the "way I react to life is the same as with glass. It can take me to a non-dual state of being."

However, he doesn't want to identify himself solely as a glass artist, so "I am looking forward to a contemplative break. I'm sure something new will come. Perhaps writing".

His studio will now move to Last School, and whilst he could have sold his tools and glass, he felt that it was better to give something back to the community. Previously he taught students for two years and now a new wing has been added to the school – for which he even found a donor in Canada – and he has arranged for the school to have a readymade glass studio built from scratch, as a 'clef a main' he says, a 'key in the door' for the students.

I would not be surprised to see future chapters from Robert in yet unknown forms as well as, hopefully, students from Last School offering their own glass exhibitions.

Peter

LEARNING EXCHANGE

Alternative Futures

The distant worlds of Zanskar, in the north Indian Himalayas, and Auroville's coastal plains, met in December through the visit of Lobzang Wangtak, a Zanskari activist who journeyed down for the Auroville Learning Exchange (ALE). ALE's original aim was to connect Auroville with countries or regions that have no current representation in Auroville to share ideas, cultures and experiences.

Lobzang is from Zanskar, a subdivision under Kargil district, Ladakh, and located in between Leh, Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh.

Lobzang is very worried about climate change, noting that Zanskar is the largest fresh water resource in the whole of Ladakh. "We can see climate change with our naked eye, the snowline is receding, glaciers too have less water. But the people don't know how to make sense of this and don't understand the complexity of climate change."

Part of his efforts to address climate change involve glacier restoration, for the glaciers are reducing "at an immense pace". He has built ice stupas, a way of retaining water for the drier summer season.

Lobzang is also concerned about tourism, that Zanskar will suffer a similar fate to nearby Leh and Kargil as it is on the threshold



PHOTOS: LOBZANG WANGTAK

There are water issues in Zanskar

of being opened to the world of mass tourism through the simultaneous construction of three new roads. "We have a unique landscape and trekking routes but we've seen with our neighbours what package tourism does." In June, he started a movement in Zanskar to mobilise and sensitise people to the magnitude of the imminent problem of greater numbers of tourists and consider what could be done differently; "As a community we can make it harder for package tourism to come by making it cost more. We have no problem with backpackers. We can give incentives to local travel agencies." He is also hoping that many small homestays will replace the construction of big new hotels, for in the tourist industry a lot of the money is usually grabbed only by a few people.

He is also concerned about preserving the heritage and the culture of his parents' generation who, he notes, "were always sustainable."

Traditionally, people would only fish when it was needed for food, and only the oldest cattle would be slaughtered, with prayers for forgiveness. It's an attitude which some of the youth have lost, so he hopes a generational bridge can be built so that living in harmony with nature can continue.

Last year he helped revive a dying local craft: that of making rope bridges over the freezing and torrential rivers with honeysuckle vines. Zanskar has some unique heritage, including breeds of horses and ponies that have evolved for high altitude living. They are prized for the work they have been doing in a car-less society, but Lobzang is worried about what will happen to them now that the automobile is taking over.

Auroville, he says, "is making me think. Everywhere I see biodiversity and trees that have returned." While here, he is learning about different possible models of living, alternative futures. "In Zanskar we

can still decide whether to have a distributed model of wealth, conservation laws, and adopt sustainable interventions to treat our waste and sewage. If there is one place where I could get a glimpse of that to take back home, it is Auroville."

He mentions how impacted he was by Wasteless (a waste management programme initiated in Auroville) and their work in educating kids. "In Zanskar we need a bridge for our society to prepare for what is coming, and children are that bridge. Can we come up with a model for the Himalayan region and equip them well enough so that these children can exert pressure for change?"

Lobzang was also able to witness how we as a community responded to the Crown road clearances just months before his own region will be impacted by its own 'development'. He attended the large community meeting in Kalabhoomi and experienced the feeling of unity and care for the future that was there.

The ALE exchanges were always intended to be two-way. Now Lobzang will host a few Aurovilians: film maker Serena and photographer Sri are already planning to visit Zanskar soon.

Dave, one of the initiators of the Auroville Learning Exchange, feels the project is important as through it we learn from those who come from afar and Auroville, in turn, passes on some of our lived experience in sustainability and how we meet challenges. "ALE is intensely personal for me, because I see that without constant new people, ideas and inspiration we are dead". More exchanges like this will be mutually enriching.

Peter

For more information visit www.navikarana.org



Discussing Zanskar's future

Feeling the silence: the new Japanese garden

Quietly, without fanfare or publicity, a beautiful Japanese garden has been created in the grounds of the Botanical Gardens. We spoke to Jyoti Naoki Eri, the designer, and Noel Parent who coordinated the construction work, to find out more.

Auroville Today: *Where did the idea come from? What was the intention?*

Joel: I always wanted to build a Japanese garden. I can't say I knew much about them, but I visited some Japanese gardens in the US, and I knew that The Mother wanted the Matrimandir gardens to be done in the Japanese way, so this inspired me to work on the project.

I asked Jyoti if he would help me by looking after the design side. I, for the most part, worked on the physical materialization.

Jyoti: When he asked me I was very much interested. When I came to Auroville I learned what The Mother had said about the Japanese aspect of the Matrimandir gardens, and I wanted to share my knowledge. However, I found some difficulty in doing this as a very structured approach to the gardens was already in place. So when Noel asked me to help, I was very interested because here we were given a space of trust and the freedom to manifest it in our own way.

What were the challenges, both in terms of designing and manifesting this garden?

Joel: From the beginning we had freedom but no money to do anything: and it's still the main obstacle. So my job also became fundraising. This limitation meant that although we began with a basic design, we had to adapt it along the way because of the lack of money. For example, the pond became smaller than we had originally planned, and we used whatever materials were given us, like stones and tiles left over from other projects.

Jyoti: But this challenge brought a lot of interesting developments. For example, we used recycled Kerala tiles for the pathways, and I think they came out well. In fact, they are very unique: I've never seen such pathways.

Actually, we use this approach quite a lot in Japan, where we use recycled materials from old temples for making walls or pathways. So this garden actually came in the Japanese way – respecting heritage from the past but using it in a new way.

Joel: Constructing the wall of the Zen garden was also really a challenge because I had to invent a way of getting the correct alignment for the tiles. I was helped at times by one or two volunteers, but constructing that wall still took around two months.

Building the bridge was also daunting because it involved working with heavy stones in the tropical heat. At times it felt never-ending, and I had to get through all of my personal 'stuff' that came up.

Another part of the challenge was holding a special energy, space, when different volunteers came to work here; allowing diversity but at the same time asking them to work in a way that was respectful to the space. We need and welcome these volunteers to help maintain the garden. But I have already had to ask other visitors to leave, including Aurovilians who wanted to do a fashion shoot here. I explained it is a garden of peace, and we want to build that energy here.

Jyoti: We need to put a signboard which clarifies what kind of atmosphere we are trying to create here.

What are the traditional Japanese elements in this garden?

Jyoti: The first thing which is important in a Japanese garden is the relationship with nature. We want people to find their own way –



Noel working on the 'unique' ornamentation in a pathway

to choose their own pathway – and be in dialogue with the gardens: with the plants, rocks, water.

However, the main focus of a Japanese garden is not the details or design. It is the spirit. We want people to feel the silence, that's the main focus. This is why we avoided any outstanding feature, and why we took away all unnecessary elements – most obviously, in the Zen garden – so people are not mentally distracted but have the space to explore within.

In fact, although there are classic features in this garden, nothing here is a copy of an existing Japanese garden. It's more like what my body remembers of Japanese gardens from my childhood in Kyoto.

Joel: We knew that we could not create an entirely traditional Japanese garden in this climate, and there are clear Indian elements, like the mango and neem trees. That's why it's a unique project; it's



A view of the garden looking towards the pavilion

our own version of a traditional Japanese garden.

Jyoti: The pathways here have *chakras*, which is another unique feature we don't have in Japan. But creating the garden is only 15% of the work. What makes classic Japanese gardens so special is not just the design but also the people dedicated to preserving these gardens over centuries: in Japan we can still find gardens in good condition that are 1200 years old. They were created as sadhana and maintained as sadhana, which is why the spiritual atmosphere is there, and they inspire people.

Noel did this work with a similar dedication; without his dedication this garden would not exist.

Joel: Most of the work was new to me.

But I'm very grateful that I was given the time and the space to do it in the way that I wanted to do it, in an inner way, but also as perfectly as possible given my level of skill and the conditions that we have here. I always wanted to do the work with a lot of consciousness, and in silence as much as possible, doing it as sadhana. So for me, from the very beginning, that was the process of building the garden.

Jyoti: This project took a long time. When we began in 2015 I had a basic idea, and we still keep that as a framework, but over the years the details have changed quite a lot. For example, the original idea was to have a large pond around the pavilion but now there is a smaller pond beside it. We changed because we have to be sensitive to water conservation in this climate. However, I like this design even better.

Is the garden finished now?

Jyoti: The main part is finished, but we need to fix wooden railings in the pavilion and put a simple roof over the meditation platform near the Zen garden. Traditionally, a Japanese garden contains the five elements...

Joel:...so we still need something which expresses the element of fire or light.

Jyoti: Every element in a Japanese garden has a meaning, nothing is meaningless. For example, the doorway at the entrance tells you that you are entering a very different space, where you are supposed to have special experiences. You need a symbolic entrance so that you show respect, otherwise the experience can be diluted. Again, the winding paths slow you down and invite you to go inwards.

What is the meaning and function of the Zen garden?

Jyoti: I think it represents a space where one can tune one's inner nature to the outer nature, through using outer nature as a mirror.

Joel: People have asked me this question and looking at it from a physical standpoint, my understanding is that it is mimicking the sea with islands and mountains so that it gives another vantage point upon nature, it provides a wider perspective.

What is the importance of water?

Jyoti: Philosophically everything is *yin* and *yang*, so water brings a more feminine element, while rocks represent more the masculine element. Similarly, changes in levels also indicate *yin* and *yang*. Actually, Japanese masters don't give many explanations like this because the goal is to go beyond mind and realise something through direct experience. In a Japanese garden, we are reaching for something much higher than the material form; it is like a doorway to a higher level, a higher landscape.

These kinds of explanation are almost prohibited traditionally, but given our multicultural context I realise we need to be able to explain

something about these things. In fact, one of our next steps is to give simple information to visitors about what key elements – like the entrance, pavilion, pathways – represent in this garden.

Will the garden continue to evolve or will you control its development?

Jyoti: The garden has to evolve by itself but also through a conversation with our descendants who will maintain it in their own way. In fact, we have already observed that some plants we originally planted did not fit in this garden, so we replaced them with other plants.

But what about the Zen rock garden? Would that also evolve?

Jyoti: I think it would because nothing is absolutely final. I think if it was created many years ago, it can be modified if there is a consensus to do this among those who are maintaining it. If we don't allow this, we are not really respecting the core of the teaching of the master or the Buddha.

And the stones also grow. They already have character but they will have even more character after a few decades or more because rain, sun and the other elements will help shape them. One stone in our Zen garden even has scratches from a JCB! This is very unique; it would never happen in a Zen

garden in Japan because in Japan people treat stones very gently.

In fact, in Japan we believe the stones are living, so we need to be quiet enough to listen to their voice. The designer of a Zen garden needs to meditate in order to listen to the way they want to be arranged, to respect what they are expressing.

Have you grown yourselves through being involved in designing and constructing this garden?

Joel: I think we both had to learn a lot of patience because it has taken so long and we had such limited resources.

Jyoti: But the fact that it has taken so long has been a blessing. Now I can say that everything that happened was necessary for our learning experience. In the beginning I had a basic idea, but through the process we learned a lot about Japanese garden creation and, specifically, what it means to create a Japanese garden in Auroville.

The discovery of nature is endless. Every day I discover something new in my small garden, and here it is an even larger discovery. I think one of the most important learnings for me from this experience is the need for humility, the realisation that I know nothing, so now I am willing to learn more. This is the kind of attitude I got from this experience.

Joel: I gained a number of things from this experience, like the ability to let go and surrender to the process of how it had to be, because while I am very perfectionist and want to do things well, being confronted by daunting tasks like building this bridge or constructing these pathways meant I also had to learn patience, and trust in something larger. It was the same with the fundraising. I had no experience of fundraising for something like this, so I had to trust that the divine, the grace, was going to help in the way it was meant to be. And something always happened which pushed us forward to the next stage.

This work also pushed me to a physical extreme, so I had to develop my physical will. Also, Mother and Sri Aurobindo's yoga is about bringing consciousness into matter and into the body so, as much as I could while I worked I would be chanting OM, trying to bring in that consciousness and offer the work. I would also take time to sit still, to listen, and just be, rather than just getting things done. As somebody who likes to get things done, with a very restless energy, this was a very good project for me.

From an interview by Alan

A short video of this Japanese garden can be seen at https://youtu.be/Jmu9irb1_4s

Reflections upon Psycho-Spiritual Obstacles on the Journey to the Divine – an insider's view

“This book is offered as an explorer’s source book in the mapping of various psychological problems inherent in the practice of Sri Aurobindo’s integral sadhana,” is how Dr. Joseph Vrinte defines the purpose of his book. “There are possible dangers in working with spiritual and psychological domains simultaneously and the various pitfalls are extensively elaborated.” He explains that his questions and critical notes are not only based on his academic analysis of Sri Aurobindo’s and The Mother’s writings – Vrinte is a retired mental health worker from The Netherlands who graduated from the Lucknow University and afterwards obtained his M.A. Philosophy / psychology and his Ph.D. from the Rohilkhand University in Bareilly – but also flow from his long connection with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and his own experience of living for more than 20 years in Auroville.

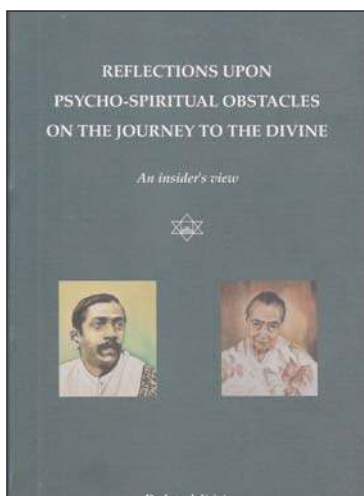
But can questions about Integral Yoga, being mental in nature, truly be answered? If the mind grows silent and intuition replaces mental argumentation, do not the answers arise spontaneously? Acknowledging this, Vrinte nevertheless argues that the tendency to inquire is not wrong as long as these questions become a means for growth and progress. In this context, he is critical of Auroville. “The author experienced an absence of a healthy culture of dialogue and a non-existence of an open discussion within the Auroville community about rational and experimental questions related to the psycho-spiritual obstacles and pitfalls during the practice of sadhana,” he writes, stating that only an open-ended dialogue about these questions can prevent the creation of dogmatic views. “The absence of a healthy culture of debate and intellectual apathy do not contribute anything in the search for the validity of Sri Aurobindo’s and The Mother’s spiritual views.”

The book opens with an essay on metaphysical contemplative psychology, which is followed by a description of the main features of Sri Aurobindo’s

metaphysical vision which is grounded in Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual practice and experiences. The author presents a brief evaluation of Sri Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *Letters on Yoga* before embarking on a discussion of transpersonal psychology and Sri Aurobindo’s metaphysical yoga psychology and integral sadhana. “Sri Aurobindo is a yogi who takes psychology in his stride,” writes Vrinte. “He gives the seeker plenty of psychological material of the unexplored levels of our being, as well as various levels of the surface consciousness which will help the sadhak in the practice of yoga. Without a clear knowledge of these psycho-spiritual planes the seeker cannot comprehend the full meaning of the process of transformation which forms the centre of his Integral Yoga.”

In part II of the book the author describes the difficulties of the mental, vital and physical being when practicing sadhana. He also touches on the risks of the vital-ego or mind-ego seeking entry into the subliminal being, which may result in serious dangers and an exaggeration of ego and desire. He stresses the need of the psychic opening and the total surrender required for the transformation of the lower nature. He also writes about the dangers when the sadhak steps into higher spiritual zones of consciousness without having transcended the human mind levels.

In the next chapters he extensively elaborates on the experience of the psychisation (psychic change) and the pitfalls that may arise during and after its coming to the front due to the person’s mental, vital and physical habits. This section is important for each Aurovilian, in view of The Mother’s statement that “*To be a True Aurovilian, the first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.*” Vrinte warns that when the sadhak believes he or she has found his or her psychic being, he may only have experienced its influence.



Also, the sadhak has to guard against confusing the pure psychic influence with suggestions of the surface desire soul or, worse, being influenced by an insincerity in one’s exterior nature.

Vrinte also poses some hard questions. Do those who claim to follow Sri Aurobindo allow for a high degree of critical thinking and analytical judgment of their spiritual life? Does their sadhana involve critical reflection? Faith is an important condition in Sri Aurobindo’s yoga, he writes, but does this mean that Sri Aurobindo wants the sadhak to blindly accept his psycho-spiritual interpretations and evaluations? Or is Sri Aurobindo’s brilliant vision taken for granted as an explanation of the whole reality, without any critical attitude and analysis? And could such an attitude degrade His spiritual vision into a dogmatic vision or even grow a new cultural-religious sect?

In his postscript Vrinte poses these questions in relation to Auroville. He observes the existence of communal egoisms in Auroville which increase the vital struggles within the community and hinder the conscious spiritual progress. “Any growing community needs a shared vision and a clear sense of purpose. Usually, this vision is propagated by an outside authority, while in Auroville the vision evolves from within, which often implies chaos, due to a lack of outward instruction, but in the end this may be necessary as an inspira-

tion for growth and a deep-rooted inner unity. To experience such unity, disunity cannot be ignored or covered up but needs to be revealed and resolved.” In this context, he observes that today Aurovilians have not reached the spiritual authority needed for the organization of Auroville as envisioned by The Mother. And he warns that, as long as Auroville has no leaders who are in constant touch with their psychic being, the reality of manifesting Mother’s Dream needs to be constantly explored. “For what is at stake is the survival of The Mother’s vision regarding the new society.”

Yet, at the book’s end he admits that Auroville, as “a secret that belongs to humanity as a whole”, can hardly be described; it is unpredictable, and one cannot expect polished results. Its primary importance, he writes, is in the process and not in the finished products. He quotes The Mother: “*Don’t try to make people understand; that which will have the most effect is the Consciousness at work in the world, because it produces in each one the utmost of which he is capable – the most that he can understand will be understood by the influence of the Pressure of the Consciousness. As soon as words are brought in, the whole mind makes it a mess.*” And She added a few months later: “*It [the city] will be built by what is invisible to you. The men who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger Forces.*”

The book is not an easy read, but is rewarding for those who persevere. As Vrinte writes, “it is written for all those readers who want to know more about these difficulties and don’t want to give up their efforts on the way.”

Carel

Reflections upon psycho-spiritual obstacles on the journey to the Divine – an insider's view

By Dr. Joseph Vrinte

Available from Prisma, Auroville, and the Auroville bookshops.

360 pages

Price in India Rs 699.

For info contact

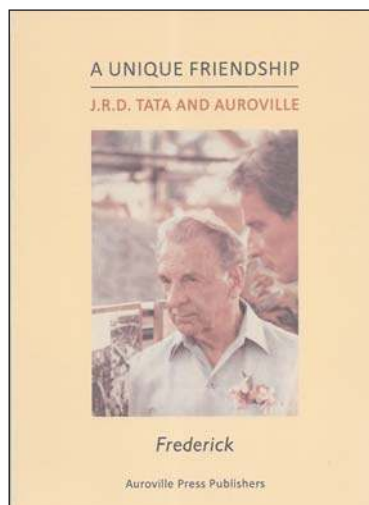
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A Unique Friendship - J.R.D. Tata and Auroville

This small book is a recollection of J.R.D. Tata’s involvement with Auroville as well as a meditative reflection by the author, Frederick (Friedrich Schulze Buxloh), of his very special relationship with this great man, one of India’s foremost industrialists who in 1992 was awarded India’s highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna, for his contribution to India’s development as the head of the then largest industrial conglomerate.

Many books have been written about J.R.D. Tata, but none mention his involvement with Auroville. Yet, it was profound and had lasting consequences. In “How it All Began” Frederick recounts meeting him for the first time at an Auroville exhibition in Bombay, where a casual discussion on Auroville’s first attempt at building a windmill led to the National Aeronautical Laboratory in Bangalore, of which J.R.D. Tata was the Chairman, ‘flooding Auroville with windmills’. For J.R.D. Tata (‘Jeh’ to his friends) was intrigued by Auroville. “I am not a follower of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, but I am intrigued. There is an old lady sitting in Pondicherry and she invites the youth of the world, and they are coming. What’s it?”

The book mentions JRD’s help in the conflicts with the Sri Aurobindo Society and his setting up, together with



Satprem, Kireet Joshi and Bijoy Singh Nahar, of Auromitra – Friends of Auroville Research Foundation – through which funds from donors could be channeled to Auroville independently of the Sri Aurobindo Society. He also gave personal visa guarantees to Frederick and his family, and later to Savitra and Francis, when these had been recalled by the Sri Aurobindo Society. He was involved in bringing the audio tapes of the Mother’s conversations with Satprem to France, where later on they were transcribed and published as *L’Agenda de Mère*. And he gave letters of introduction to many

great industrial houses, urging them to help Auroville.

In 1980, when the Government of India headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi passed the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act, he became a member of the Auroville International Advisory Council, together with Mr. M’Bow, the Secretary-General of UNESCO, Mr. Narasimha Rao, the then Minister of Education and later Prime Minister of India, and Ms. Lyudmila Zhivkova, the Minister of Culture and Education of Bulgaria. Mr. Kireet Joshi, then Special Secretary Ministry of Education, was the Council’s Secretary. The book has a report of the only time this Council could meet in Auroville. Frederick further recounts how JRD, at Kireet’s Joshi’s request, helped to reformulate certain important passages of the Auroville Foundation Act.

The major part of this book describes the intense personal relationship between Jeh and Frederick, which can be felt throughout the book, in the many documents which are shown, but especially in the meditative comments Frederick has added. If Jeh admired Frederick “for his dedication to a great cause”, Frederick admired Jeh as “being a knight of light, of courage, of truth and of love.”

For Frederick, JRD’s last visit to Auroville was particularly intense. He

recalls that, when JRD had come back to his room to rest, he had told Frederick, “Now you tell me.” “That voice came from faraway and it reached a faraway place in me,” recounts Frederick. “Somehow it unlocked something which had been pent up in me, a flow of – well the best word for it would be dreams, but it was more than dreams, it was like the golden essence of why I am on earth. I must have spoken for twenty, thirty minutes. What he heard or whether he had fallen asleep by that time, I do not know. But for me, it was a very strong experience of opening up in his presence.”

The next day JRD returned to Chennai by helicopter and graciously offered a seat to some of the Aurovilians who had hosted him. Frederick brought a big bag of bougainvillea, the flower Mother called ‘Protection’, and together they showered these flowers over the Matrimandir and Auroville.

The book is a fine and intense read.

Carel

A Unique Friendship – J.R.D. Tata and Auroville

By Frederick

127 pages

Available from White Seagull

Bookshop, Auroville

Price in India Rs 333 (Aurovilians 20% discount)

Award for B.V. Doshi

Shri Balkrishna Doshi, the eminent architect and ex-member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, received the RIBA Royal Gold Medal 2022, one of the world’s highest honours for architecture.

Visits from Regional Registration officers

About 30 non-Indian Aurovilians who had joined efforts to stop bulldozers destroying the Crown Road stretch through the Bliss and Darkali forests, have received visits from officers of the Regional Registration Office, requesting to see their passport and Residential Permit, asking if they had been joining the ‘agitation’.

Resignations from 150th anniversary core group

The Working Committee announced that Hemant, Jürgen and Christine have resigned from the Core Group of Sri Aurobindo’s 150th Birth Anniversary team.

Outreach Media

On January 21st, the Auroville Foundation instructed Outreach Media to vacate its office and surrender all its material and immaterial assets to the Auroville Foundation. The instruction was refused. The Funds and Assets Management Committee objected to the instruction, stating that only the FAMC is authorised to take such decisions.

Auroville Council questions ATDC legitimacy

On January 13, the Auroville Council published its note to the Auroville Town Development Committee (ATDC) stating “As you have misinterpreted the minutes of the Governing Board and at the same time intend to ignore the Residents Assembly’s processes, although you are constituted by the RA, we must on these grounds alone place your office appointments and legitimacy in question.”

AuroSur

Auroville International Argentina has started AuroSur, News from Auroville which will appear every two months. For info contact www.escuchaintegral.com

Art exhibition at Kala Kendra

In December last year, the Pondicherry Art Academy showed 180 paintings by 90 artists from 19 states of India at Kala Kendra. The Academy aims to help budding artists by showcasing their work along with those of eminent artists, and also to encourage women artists. It also holds art competitions for school children. The selection for this exhibition was made from 548 entries.

Restrospective 2021

Savitri Bhavan hosted an Auroville art retrospective 2021 from 17 December till 14 January. Works by Sathya, Shinso, Audrey, Hufreesh, Xinpeng, Abhijit, Sangara and Birgitta were displayed.

Wildlife in Auroville

Aurosylle and Tim gave an informative introduction to wildlife in Auroville during a live and online event on 21st January in Bharat Nivas.

Of special interest is that prior to 1972, Auroville had a count of 25 bird species. Today there are over 130 different types, with new species arriving each year, such as the Ultramarine Flycatcher which normally lives in Nepal and the Western Ghats.

The value of art

Krishna Devanandan studied and grew up in the forested hills and valleys of Kodaikanal. She is a Bharatanatyam dancer, she practices and teaches tai chi, helps manage Auroville Art Service and the Auroville Film Festival and is a member of the Funds and Assets Resource Group (FARG).

Can you tell a little about your background?

Krishna: I spent my childhood in Kodaikanal and studied in the Kodaikanal International School. In fact, we had some children from Auroville in the school. I remember there was a child from Auroville in my class and whenever his father visited, he would play the guitar and tell us stories, and all of us really loved it.

How did you decide to be a dancer?

Initially, I thought I would become a doctor like my parents, or a research scientist, but the teacher for my first biology class made it so boring that I gave up the idea. I had taken up Bharatanatyam dance in school and I loved it. We had an excellent teacher (Roshan Vajifdar Ghosh). She never taught me the traditional dance pieces, the submissive woman stuff. She choreographed her own pieces like Tagore's poem: *where the mind is without fear*. She influenced my thinking without talking much to me, just by her way of being and she made me understand that dance is connected to everything. My understanding of being a woman and sexuality was deeply influenced by the pieces she choreographed for me. Interestingly, she was a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. So, at the age of 15, I decided that I was going to be a dancer and my parents were very open about it.

After school, I joined the dance college of Kalakshetra Foundation in Chennai. After completing the course, I was part of Chandralekha's dance group for 10 years from 1989 to 1999. From 1995 onward, I also started working with my friend Padmini Chettur in her dance group, performing contemporary dance.

At some point you stopped dancing? Why?

The kind of dance I did was very truthful and one was required to be very honest while doing it. Padmini was not only a choreographer but also a close friend and one day she told me that whatever the movement she asked me to do, the only thing that was expressed was pain. Once I was doing a movement and suddenly I was looking inside myself and there was this deep well of darkness inside. Around that time, I also had a bike accident and the ACL ruptured in my left knee. I realised I had to make a quick decision to stop dance or I would have more accidents and injuries. I was one of the oldest dancers in Padmini's group, having danced with her for the longest duration. I told her that I would not participate in new dance pieces but would complete the

performance tours for the existing pieces. Also, my marriage had ended in 2006 and I was living by myself which left me relatively free. I had already started looking at something to do with the environment and ecological sciences, and wanted to live in a place where there were trees and forests and I could see the stars at night. But I wasn't thinking specifically of Auroville.

How did you come to Auroville?

I had family friends in Pondicherry and while visiting them in 2006, I went along with one of them to attend a *tai chi* class. Marco was conducting the class and I realised that he was an extraordinary teacher. At that time, the classes were held every Tuesday and Wednesday. So, every week I would travel from Chennai to attend the *tai chi* classes. I would come by bus and then hire a bike. I did this from 2006 to 2008.

How did you meet your husband, Christoph?

I met him here in Auroville in 2009 when we worked together on the first film festival. And then in 2010, a small group of Aurovilians decided to go on a trek to the Himalayas and Christoph and I got together on this beautiful trek. The trek was very interesting because all of us decided to do a large part of it in silence and in meditation.

And you have continued with tai chi till now?

Oh yes! That's the main thing for me and I keep it as my structure in Auroville. Otherwise, I feel that Auroville has so many interesting activities and people that it would be very easy for me to get involved in a number of things.

Everything I do relates to my *tai chi* in some way. *Tai chi* is the study of *chi* (energy) in the body and the movement of *chi* within oneself and in the world around you. It is about learning how to actively guide that *chi* within you and outside of you. Whatever I take up, whether it is art service or film festival or any kind of task force in Auroville, I always ask myself: does it relate back to my practice of *tai chi* in some way?

How did the Art Service start and what do you do for it?

I've been the manager for Art Service from the time it started in 2012. It started from the Integral Sustainability Platform (ISP). Marco took me to the meetings and one group in the ISP was about art and culture in Auroville. From the discussions, it emerged very clearly that we needed a separate service for artists.

Before the Art Service came along, artists were working in isolation, struggling to do what they do and offer it to Auroville. Since they had no combined platform, it was easy to ignore their voices and the needs of this sector, even though there are about 200 artists in Auroville. When we formed this platform, the



idea was to make this sector known. We do it through a website where you can find out who is doing what in this sector in Auroville.

The basic principle of Art Service is that beauty, harmony and art should be offered freely in Auroville because this is what Mother said in *A Dream*. So, as an Aurovillian, you can walk into Bharat Nivas or CRIPA or MMC (multimedia centre) and watch a movie or a play or a music show free of charge. This puts a lot of responsibility on the people working in this sector. For example, anybody who puts on a play has to find the money for it themselves and cannot or, rather, will not, raise it from the audience.

What else do you do?

I am also a member of the Funds and Asset Resource Group (FARG) which does research for the Funds and Asset Management Committee (FAMC). If the FAMC needs some information or research done for any decision to be made regarding a unit or any activity of Auroville, they can ask the FARG to do it. It's very interesting for me to see the internal decision-making processes in Auroville.

How did you get involved in the Auroville film festival?

In September 2008, Marco and Liliana said to me, "Well, how about moving to Auroville and starting a film festival? We want to start it and can you help to organize it? We want somebody with your skills." By that time, I had become very close to Marco and Liliana and had developed a deep love and respect for them. I was in my 40s when I decided to move to Auroville in 2008. As a dancer, one does many different things to earn money, and one of the things I had done was event

organization. I was a partner in a company which used to organise rock concerts in Chennai. Hence, I didn't have a problem in organising the film festival, but I learnt to do it in the Auroville way. First, Marco announced it and then people who were interested got together. It was always a teamwork. I only do the administration part of it.

The main aim of Auroville is human unity and we have a category which helps us pick films from around the world on this theme. But we also have films made about Auroville and by Aurovilians. Earlier, it was always outside filmmakers coming in and making films about Auroville, interpreting what is happening here. And then slowly, over the last ten years, we have had a growing band of Aurovillian filmmakers who express from within what Auroville is all about. These films are very different.

Having a film festival in Auroville has also brought film-making into the Auroville schools. Students now have the option to learn it and they also know that if they make a film, they have a place to show it. In the last two years we also have some very interesting filmmakers in the bio-region working in different ways and taking up different kinds of stories. We are proud that we can show their work.

This year, for the first time, the film festival couldn't be held in Auroville because of COVID. We decided to go online so that anyone anywhere could watch the films. When we closed the AVFF 2022, we came to know that 1260 persons had tuned into the event. This led to 2990 streams, mostly from Asia (2530), followed by Europe (246), North America (110) and Australia (49). In other words, it was a great success: many more people had watched the films than otherwise would have been possible.

As told to Archana

PASSINGS

Chitra Balaguru

In the afternoon of January 13th, Chitra Balaguru, committed suicide in her Humanscapes home, which she shared with her husband Balaguru and their daughter Praveen. She was 39 years old. Originally hailing from Chennai, Chitra came to Auroville in 2014 and officially joined in March 2016. She worked at Auroville Healthy Services as a much appreciated, conscientious and friendly hygiene inspector and care giver. Chitra's body was taken to the Farewell Centre and cremated at Auroville's cremation grounds on January 15th.



E. Krishnamoorthy

On January 24th, E. Krishnamoorthy of Sangaman passed away in the General Hospital in Pondicherry, where he had been lying in coma after a road accident on January 12th. Krishnamoorthy came from Kuliyalpalayam and worked from the early 1990s for the Auroville Messenger Service, bringing the *Auroville News* and other post items on his bicycle to the various communities. With his open smile and upbeat demeanour, his was a welcome presence in those much quieter days without email and telephones. Afterwards, he worked for the Solar Service and Electrical Service, and more recently at the UTS Taxi Service. He became a resident of Auroville in 2020. His body was cremated at the Auroville burial and cremation grounds on January 25th.



About Auroville Today

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