

This issue is almost entirely devoted to the tumultuous events of the last weeks which saw bulldozers removing trees planted by Auroville foresters and Auroville habitations in the Youth Centre, to clear a path for the Right of Way of the Crown, which is intended to connect the four zones of the city. This action was opposed and decried by some who saw it as an assault, not only on the environment, but also on the fabric of our unity, while others, while not necessarily applauding the methods, were happy to feel that, after 53 years, an important step was being taken towards the materialization of the city.

In this 10-page issue, we present various perspectives, as well as a timeline of the swiftly escalating events. We also cover the traumatic impact upon those who were most affected, as well as a selection of the letters received from outside Auroville-connected individuals and organisations expressing their concern at events, and offering advice and support.

Times like this enable our deep dissensions to surface, but also our resilience and our desire to move forward more united than ever before. This latter aspiration has been most evident in the way the Youth Centre residents and friends have once more welcomed Aurovilians to their gatherings to share food, and even laughter. We celebrate their spirit, and cover some of the other initiatives springing up as a means of healing our challenged unity.

Finally, although the dust is still to settle on these deeply disruptive events, and while uncertainty remains about what will happen in the immediate and long-term future, we present some perspectives on the possible lessons we can learn from some of the most turbulent weeks in Auroville's 53 year history.

Clearing a path for the Right of Way of the Crown



The clearing through Bliss Forest

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

February – November 2020

Auroville Town Development Council (ATDC) wants to lay a high tension cable along the Crown Road route (a 4km circular road), which is conceived as running through Bliss Forest and Youth Centre. The cable laying requires clearance and trench digging for the infrastructure. ATDC attempts to do a survey of the area, with no prior communication. Youth Centre and Bliss Forest propose an alternative route for cable laying, along the existing road from Youth Centre to Lilaloka.

November 2020 – March 2021

A meeting is held (November 2) between ATDC, FAMC and various working groups, and stewards of Bliss Forest and Youth Centre community, about the proposed alternative route. In the coming weeks, the Auroville Foundation directs ATDC to clear the Right of Way along the Crown route, and issues a Work Order, with no communication to the affected communities. In March 2021, ATDC posts on Auronet its intention to implement the high tension cable along the Crown route, and a new location for the Youth Centre.

June

ATDC informs the Bliss Forest stewards that it will start a topographical survey in Bliss Forest. As the survey proceeds, the stewards note that the survey does not seem to meet the stated purpose, but merely follows the purpose of marking a future road and corridor of the Crown. They express their disappointment about this miscommunication from ATDC.

4 July

The new Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Dr Jayanti Ravi, arrives in Auroville.

31 July

Crown Walk: The newly-appointed Secretary

walks the proposed Crown route with members of working groups, ATDC and the community. Supporters of the Crown are enthused but fences and forest are trampled.

August – October

Various meetings are held – at short notice, with no email invitation – between ATDC, the Secretary and people who would be directly affected by the laying of the HT cable and development of the Crown (Darkali, Centre Field, Bliss, Youth Centre), and other stakeholders. The affected community members try to resolve things with goodwill and try to avoid confrontation. A survey of trees and buildings is undertaken, and shared with the community, and some points are clarified.

October

Nominations of the new Governing Board, Auroville Foundation are announced, as are Nominations of the new International Advisory Council.

Friday December 3

ATDC writes to Youth Centre, informing them that clearance work along the Crown route will commence “next week”.

Saturday December 4

9am

Contrary to what ATDC had previously informed the Youth Centre and Bliss Forest stewards (that work would start the following week), JCB bulldozers (from Auroville Road Service) suddenly arrive at Bliss forest, Lilaloka entrance on December 4th, with no pre-warning to the community. They are accompanied by members of ATDC, and a few Aurovilians who support this action. They start uprooting trees. No Work Order is presented by the people doing the clearing work. Community members call out for help. More than a hundred Aurovilians rush to the site. The police is

called by the Foundation. After being given information by people present, the police leave the site.

12 am

Residents reach out to the Working Committee (WC) and the ATDC for explanation. About 150 community members hold an emergency meeting. Three statements are agreed upon as a basis for Residents Assembly Decisions:

1. Request the halt of all further development until a RAD decision is made
2. Request the immediate resignation of Working Committee members Anu, Srimoyi, and Arun
3. Request the resignation of all ATDC members

10:15pm

Three bulldozers are spotted outside the Auroville Foundation office. A late-night meeting is taking place, with people coming and going.

Sunday December 5

1am

At 1am, the bulldozers leave the Auroville Foundation office, escorted by many police officers with members of the ATDC, and head to Bliss Forest to complete their work of uprooting trees in the middle of the night. Youth Centre residents rush to stop the advance of the bulldozers. Extra police officers have already erected multiple roadblocks at all access points, to stop other concerned residents from reaching Youth Centre. The police detain some of the Aurovillian teenagers, including a girl. A few dozen Aurovilians manage to reach the site through the forest. The detained youth are eventually released. Two members of Working Committee arrive on site.

3pm

More than 500 shocked community members gather at Kalabhumhi amphitheatre. The consensus is that the events of the night represent a kind of behaviour that cannot be accepted in Auroville.

continued on page 2

- Minutes of the 57th GB meeting
 - Collective trauma
 - Letters
 - Crown perspectives in a nutshell
 - A great work and some great lies
- pages 3–6

- Why the resistance against Auroville's Crown project is not justified
 - Why Auroville needs to be a model of exemplary development practice
- pages 6–7

- Trying to understand the Divine game plan
 - Take a stand against the toxic narrative
 - The larger learning?
- pages 8–9

- Phoenix emerging: the youth centre starts again
 - The weather
 - Passing: Bernard Borg, Surya, Peggy Rustomji
- pages 9–10

continued from page 1

A resolution is signed to this effect, by all present at the meeting (at least 500 people) and more signatures are later added. The resolution is communicated to the Foundation and working groups.

Auroville is a place *where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity.*

As a member of the Auroville community, I cherish these values and the work we have to do together, whatever the challenges.

I reject violence, threats & actions which undermine community processes and our collective work.”

The Auroville International Board (AVI Centres) sends a statement to the Working Committee and the Secretary of Auroville Foundation in support of the community.

Monday December 6

6pm

Five Aurovilians meet the Secretary at Matrimandir. She requests the Youth Centre community to step aside. She verbally offers INR 10 lakhs to the Youth Centre, and the possibility of relocating the buildings in Bliss Forest if the community agrees. They are given until 7am next day to respond.

8pm

Youth Centre members call for an emergency meeting to report the outcome of the talk with the Secretary.

The youth accept to collaborate under some conditions:

- They will dismantle the buildings themselves
- They decline the financial compensation
- ATDC should provide the signed NOC (Non-Objection Certificate) within 48 hours to allow the construction of the new buildings in the same area

Although this decision does not align with the Residents Assembly process, (stewards cannot take such decisions before consulting the whole community), it was agreed that collaboration would ease the tension. A written response is sent within the required timeframe to the Secretary and the ATDC.

Tuesday December 7

7am

No answer has been received from the Secretary's office by 7am, the deadline given by the Secretary. The Youth Centre continues to wait for a written agreement signed by the Secretary.

8am

A spontaneous meeting is held with the wider community at the Youth Centre. There is no answer from the Secretary's office so far. While the meeting is undergoing, an answer from ATDC is received, but it differs from the original request, and this is confirmed by the Secretary's office.

12pm

Outreach Media – Auroville's service that facilitates external media relations on behalf of the community – is asked by the Secretariat to “refrain on issuing any statements until further notice”. The Auroville Foundation office appoints two “Official Spokespersons”.

3pm

In order to support the youth in these challenging times, a musical get-together is planned at Youth Centre. However, a parallel event is then announced by the newly-appointed “Spokespersons” at the same venue. Despite this, the two



Unidentified people participate in the destruction of the Youth Centre



Protesting against the forest clearing

events combine and it goes ahead peacefully.

Wednesday December 8

The Residents Assembly Service asks the Working Committee (WC) to organise an emergency Residents Assembly Decision. It is refused by the majority of the Working Committee (2 members in favour, and 4 members against).

An alternative, more environmentally-sensitive proposal of development of Bliss Forest is presented by Bliss stewards to ATDC.

Announcement of the first General Meeting for the process of the first Resident Assembly Decision (RAD) for 20th December: to put on hold the development of the Crown until further notice from the Residents Assembly.

Thursday December 9

7am

More than 100 unidentified people, allegedly hired by an Aurovillian, enter the Youth Centre with two JCBs. The Youth Centre team and concerned citizens try to make sense of the situation, to establish order and request the official Work Order. Ignoring their requests, the crowd and machines forcefully enter and start destroying infrastructure, bulldozing trees and buildings. Aurovilians are manhandled. Rampant destruction continues despite all efforts to peacefully deal with the situation. Finally, residents from different communities of Auroville come together. Holding hands, they silently bear witness. Within two hours of the enforced destruction, all the buildings are down. Aurovilians watch the destruction in shock. More buildings were taken down than had earlier been agreed upon.

3pm

Some residents attend a meeting with the Secretary at the Unity Pavilion called by the Foundation. At the same time, JCBs make their way towards Darkali Forest, driven by people from a distant village (not direct neighbours of Auroville). This sudden arrival of JCBs causes a chaotic situation as Aurovilians and concerned people try to stop them without using violence. No Work Order is shown. Rumours circulate that there is potential for arrests, police cases, visa issues and other punitive action. After some confrontations, the situation evolves into a peaceful sit-down protest, as the people present chant and refuse to budge.

6pm

The Darkali stewards communicate with the Secretary, and emphasise that they do not agree with the clearing and gain an agreement to stop the work that night. They reluctantly agree not to obstruct the road clearing when it recommences in the morning at 6am.

Peaceful protesters continue to camp at the site overnight.

Friday December 10

7.30am

Four bulldozers, along with Auroville's Road Service and members of ATDC arrive in Darkali. They start bulldozing work, while Auroville residents protest silently. Later in the morning, a JCB heads towards a precious water catchment, and a few Aurovilians stop it.

2pm

Bulldozers start the work on the other side of Darkali Forest.

Concerned residents rush to the site.

2.30pm

A Status Quo Order is obtained from the National Green Tribunal, Southern Zone, which orders that felling of trees must stop for one week (until 17 December). All work is stopped.

Former International Advisory Council members send a collective statement to the Chairman of the Governing Board, sharing their deep admiration for Auroville and concern regarding the unfolding events.

A letter is sent to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu by Vasanthi Devi, the former Chairperson of the State Commission for Women, Tamil Nadu, and 10 other prominent Indian professionals, expressing their “grave concerns” for Auroville, making reference to “hired strongmen” and the “deplorable” threats towards Aurovilians. They emphasise the need for development decisions to be “taken in consultation with the residents of Auroville and the state government”.

Saturday December 11

The Minutes of the 57th Governing Board Meeting (2 November) are circulated, which cite multiple action points that “needs to be taken to accelerate the development of the Auroville Township” and that an “initial budget for the programmes, events and projects of Rs 50 Crores” from the Government of India has been approved. The Board states that it sees the 150th Birth Anniversary of Sri Aurobindo as the beginning of a “new phase of accelerated development” of Auroville.

Auroville's current International Advisory Council expresses its concerns in writing to the Governing Board, and calls for inclusiveness and collaboration.

2pm

Auroville Road Service team is seen working in Bliss forest again, with a parked JCB, a tractor and a trailer. They are accompanied by one of the “Official Spokespersons” of the Foundation office. A passing witness calls a member of the Working Committee, who arrives on site. A Work Order dated December 11th is presented.

Sunday December 12

Auroville Road Service proceeds with marking the land for the high tension cable.

The Secretary addresses an event held at Auroville's Unity Pavilion for Golden Chain Fraternity members (alumni and well-wishers of the Sri Aurobindo ashram). The invitation encourages them to “help in the construction of ‘the city of dawn’”, and encourages people with different kinds of expertise to “offer their energy to this endeavour”, and states that board, lodging and a stipend will be given to such volunteers. She states in the meeting:

“Many people have contributed for a vision and dream of the Mother”

“There's no need for analysis and paralysis, which has been happening again and again”

“There cannot be anything better than what Mother has given” in the Master Plan

“Why are 3000 of us stopping, decelerating,

preventing the entry of the other 47,000 people who are all waiting? Is it your right?”

“We're all one, we're all children of the mother. But at the same time, even in your own home, when there is something you want to do in a child, you have to very gently, very patiently, but, restrain the child. And that's what we tried on December 4th.”

“JCBs are not in any way violent.”

“At the Youth Centre destruction, ‘young volunteers from the bioregion’ were invited ‘to come and help’ and make ‘a human cordon’ like the ones ‘the celebrities have’ to protect them from people who want to take selfies. As ‘the JCBs are the celebrity, because you have to get the work done,’ the human cordon was seen as necessary.”

“I would like to very strongly say, there was no violence. On the contrary. There was definitely an attempt to restrain...”

“Let us all connect, if you're all children of one mother, but in a disciplined, in a proper planned way.”

December 15–16

Auroville Road Service continue road-leveling and trench digging at Youth Centre and Bliss – actions which seem to contravene the court order.

Three members of ATDC resign.

Friday December 17

The Stay Order is extended until December 21.

Saturday December 18

The trench work still goes on, seemingly in contravention of the court order.

Monday December 20

4pm

The Resident Assembly Service holds a meeting in preparation for decision-making to stop all development work on the Crown until further notice from the Residents' Assembly. More than 700 people attend. The Secretary attends the meeting and requests to speak to all present.

At the meeting, Aurovillian architect Omar confirms that he and fellow architect David Nightingale are moving forward with a collaborative brain-storming process (the Dreamcatchers method) with Auroville's architects and urban planners and the Vastu Shilpa Foundation (under the guidance of renowned architect Shri B V Doshi) to integrate the Galaxy concept and Master Plan framework, in a way that is sensitive to local conditions. The group will offer its findings to ATDC and the Foundation in due course.

Tuesday December 21

The Tribunal's Status Quo order is extended until the next hearing on 3 January, 2022.



Objecting to the clearing of a stretch of Darkali forest

Thursday December 23

The Auroville International Board sends a second letter to Dr Ravi and the Governing Board, urging the necessity to uphold Human Unity as a core value in the evolution of Auroville. It expresses hope in the collaboration of Auroville's architects (in a Dreamweaving process), and the Vastu Shilpa Foundation to strive towards Detailed Development Plans.

December 27th

In a well-attended general meeting, residents give enthusiastic support to the Dreamweaving proposal.

December 28th

The ATDC announced that it will continue with Crown development work, regardless of the Residents' Assembly decision, with reference to sections 19(1)c and 17(e) of the Auroville Foundation Act and in compliance with the decision of the Governing Board, subject to the verdict of the National Green Tribunal.

Minutes of the 57th Governing Board Meeting 2021

Auroville Today does not normally publish the integral version of the minutes of the meetings of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. We make an exception as this time the Board gave extensive observations on the detailed analysis of the Secretary, which has not been shared with the community.

Present: Shri. R. N. Ravi, Chairman, Auroville Foundation, Dr Tamilisai Soundararajan, Shri. Aravindan Neelakandan, Prof. Goutam Ghosal, Prof. R. S. Sarraju, Members, Governing Board and Dr Jayanti S. Ravi, Secretary, AF. Dr Nirima Oza, Smt. Darshana M. Dabral, Joint Secretary & Financial Advisor and Smt. Neeta Prasad, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Education, Government of India attended online. Prof. N.G. Basappa could not attend. Dr Nirima Oza could not participate in the online meeting effectively due to connectivity issues.

Secretary, Auroville Foundation (AF) welcomed the Hon’ble Chairman and Governing Board members and gave a presentation, which includes a work plan outline for the period 2021-2022 to 2025-2026 focusing on the growth of Auroville as per the vision of the Mother.

Secretary informed the Board that she had prepared the presentation after studying and compiling decisions already taken in previous Governing Board meetings and her interactions with various Auroville working groups and residents.

Chairman and members of the Board appreciated the detailed and comprehensive analysis of the various issues, challenges and proposed ways forward for the integral development of Auroville. The Board took decisions and made observations as detailed below.

1. Governance

The Board noted the following in relation to the present status of governance and organisation in Auroville:

- 1.1. There is a proliferation of groups and discussion forums.
- 1.2. There seems to be decision paralysis or the inability to put decisions into practice.
- 1.3. The Residents Assembly is seen by many as a decision-making body for even operational issues that are under the responsibility of working groups.
- 1.4. The absence of work plans or governance and organisation that ensures implementation of work plans.
- 1.5. Culture of “stakeholders” seems to have replaced the culture of “voluntary contributors” / “willing servitors”.
- 1.6. Working group member selection processes include conventional canvassing and voting.

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

- 1.1. Decision-taking in Auroville needs to be driven by the ideals given by the Mother.
- 1.2. There is a need for the preparation of work plans for each work area of Auroville by the respective working groups. These work plans must relate to the realization of the ideals of Auroville including township development, governance, economy, education and research.
- 1.3. Selection of human resources for working groups must be done with reference to the skill sets, experience, commitment and engagement needed for the implementation of the ideals of Auroville in general and work plans of working groups in particular.
- 1.4. There is a need to promote a culture of engagement, transparency, commitment, accountability and integrity.
- 1.5. The initiative to have contact persons / coordinators for residential communities to engage with residents for cultural, academic and other activities that strengthen the spirit of goodwill and harmony may be continued through periodical interactions with the contact persons / coordinators.
- 1.6. The Working Committee must assist the Governing Board with the implementation of decisions taken by the Board within a time frame.

2. Township Development

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

- 2.1. Presently Auroville has a population of about 3,500 persons scattered over a large land area (also outside the Auroville Master Plan area).
- 2.2. There is scattered, sporadic and ad-hoc development resulting in high-cost infrastructure and lack of a cohesive social fabric.
- 2.3. Master Plan right-of-ways (the Crown,

radials, outer ring and international zone loop, etc.) have not been cleared, resulting in haphazard infrastructure development at high installation and maintenance costs.

- 2.4. There is a lack of focus on the development of the township amongst the various working groups and Auroville residents.
- 2.5. The low population dispersed over a vast land area, results in scattered habitation and land protection issues.
- 2.6. Housing and other facilities to be developed to welcome more people with commitment to the ideals of Auroville.

The Board is of the view that the following action needs to be taken to accelerate the development of the Auroville Township:

- 2.1. On the occasion of Sri Aurobindo’s 150th birth anniversary, a fresh impetus must be given to realise the Auroville Township in accordance with the Auroville Universal Township Master Plan within a time frame.
- 2.2. The Governing Board noted and endorsed the decisions already taken by the previous Governing Board on Auroville Township Development including planning and development as per the Auroville Master Plan and engagement with the Tamil Nadu Government to obtain statutory land use regulation (New Town Development Authority) for the Auroville Master Plan area to ensure land use as envisaged in the Auroville Master Plan.
- 2.3. The ATDC (Auroville Town Development Council) needs to have a work plan, with clearly defined deliverables, time lines, a human resources plan and annual budget.
- 2.4. ATDC membership selection / nomination to be done with a focus on competence, skills, work experience, and a commitment to plan and develop the Auroville Township in accordance with the Auroville Master Plan.
- 2.5. The ATDC needs to complete the work of preparation of Detailed Development Plans (DDPs) based on the Auroville Master Plan.
- 2.6. Build the township infrastructure backbone (water, electricity, communication, sewerage, etc.) along the fully cleared RoWs to enable planned urban development.
- 2.7. A tree plantation drive may be initiated with immediate effect only in the green belt and the green corridors / network inside the city area as provided for in the Auroville Master Plan.
- 2.8. All Master Plan deviations on the land earmarked for the Crown have to be cleared so that the circular Crown Road and related infrastructure can be built without further delay. A similar exercise shall be implemented for the twelve radials and the outer ring road, where land ownership permits.
- 2.9. The work on the completion of the Matrimandir gardens and the lake may be accelerated.
- 2.10. Housing development to accommodate (young) Aurovilians must be undertaken.
- 2.11. New education facilities may be built, while ensuring utmost utilization of the existing ones.
- 2.12. Development of the Industrial Zone is essential to make Auroville the self-supporting township as envisaged by the Mother.
- 2.13. The Board endorses Office Order 491 dated 15th July 2021 (read with corrigendum dated 25th October 2021) issued by the Under Secretary AF with the approval of Secretary AF for the nomination of members of the Auroville Town Development Council (ATDC), including a nominee by the Secretary, Auroville Foundation (AF) on behalf of the Governing Board. Secretary AF is authorized to nominate the Governing Board’s nominee on the ATDC as and when required for smooth and efficient functioning of the ATDC.
- 2.14. A budget outlay of Rs. 1,000 Crores is approved by the Board for Auroville Township development for the period 2021-22 to 2025-26 on the basis of the budget prepared by the ATDC. Detailed budget estimates may be prepared by the ATDC and scrutinized by the Secretary, AF for submission to the Ministry of Education. Expenditure to be incurred with an effective and transparent monitoring and reporting system.

3. Land

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

- 3.1. There are private developments (residential and commercial) both in the city area and

in the greenbelt.

- 3.2. There is slow progress in city land consolidation.
- 3.3. Some lands of the Auroville Foundation have been encroached upon.
- 3.4. Some lands of the Auroville Foundation are not utilised, underutilised, or not utilised in accordance with land use as envisaged in the Auroville Master Plan.

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

- 3.1. The land acquisition proposal for the remaining private lands in the City Area according to the Auroville Master Plan is ratified by the Board.
- 3.2. The Board also endorses the proposal to engage with the Tamil Nadu Government for the establishment of a New Town Development Authority (NTDA) for the Auroville Master Plan area.
- 3.3. The Board advises that stewardships of Auroville lands are changed periodically.
- 3.4. Appointment of experts (on contract basis) for land consolidation.
- 3.5. Prepare a land and building assets database with details of present and potential utilisation.
- 3.6. Optimise the utilisation of all land and building assets.

4. Economy

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

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

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

- 4.1. Preparation of an annual Auroville budget that includes all resources and all needs.
- 4.2. Preparation of a medium and long-term economy plan including financial plans of the income-generating units of Auroville.
- 4.3. Make capital available for the growth of existing income-generating units and start-up capital for new income-generating units.
- 4.4. Establish an innovation and incubation centre for the youth to be actively engaged.
- 4.5. Strengthen and support the knowledge economy.
- 4.6. All Auroville lands, buildings and other assets must be utilized to generate collective resources for Auroville as whole.
- 4.7. Use some of the outlying lands of Auroville for income generation through joint ventures or ventures in which Auroville has a passive stake.
- 4.8. Elimination of internal money exchange.
- 4.9. Ensure that all basic needs of all residents are met and that all residents contribute to the realisation of Auroville.
- 4.10. Enhance Auroville food production to meet the needs of Auroville.
- 4.11. Simplify the governance and organisation structures (trusts, units, activities and committees).
- 4.12. Integrated common accounting systems to be implemented for more effective and transparent financial management.
- 4.13. Contributions by income-generating units to be reviewed (rationale of the 33% contribution; utilisation of surpluses).
- 4.14. Reduce construction costs with innovative construction practices and effective and

transparent price discovery mechanisms

- 4.15. The Mother envisaged Auroville as a self-supporting township. All Auroville residents are expected to contribute to achieving this goal and work for the collective welfare of Auroville.

5. Education and Research

The Board noted the following in relation to the present status of education and research in Auroville:

- 5.1. There is a mix of conventional education systems with the envisioned ideal of integral education with a dedicated team of teachers.
- 5.2. There seem to be under-utilised facilities.
- The Board is of the view that the following action needs to be taken in relation to education and research in Auroville:
 - 5.1. Establishment of various Centres of Excellence in Auroville.
 - 5.2. Auroville to become a hub for integral education and research.
 - 5.3. The Board noted that the establishment of the Sri Aurobindo International Multiversity as an affiliating network for integral education, research, teaching, training and extension is a good and appropriate initiative to be launched during the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo.
 - 5.4. The Centre for International Research on Human Unity (CIRHU) may be established as planned.
 - 5.5. Auroville may engage with other institutions and organisations and conduct exchange programs, thereby sharing the experience and skills of Auroville with the world at large
 - 5.6. Youth hubs and innovation labs may be established in the township.
 - 5.7. The students of Auroville schools may be given a broader exposure to the philosophy, teachings and vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

6. Entry Process

The Board is of the view that the following action needs to be taken in relation to the entry of new residents into Auroville:

- 6.1. The entry process of Auroville should be more welcoming and the Auroville population should grow to 50,000 as envisaged while ensuring that newcomers understand, and subscribe to, the ideals of Auroville. A population of 15,000 by 2025 may be achieved.
- 6.2. There could be active engagement with Auroville International Centres and Sri Aurobindo Centres to facilitate the joining of volunteers and interns while maintaining international diversity and commitment to the ideals of Auroville
- 6.3. The Board noted that the Mother had envisaged Auroville as an ideal town, and that when Auroville residents live by the ideals given by the Mother, Auroville will become a magnet that attracts people from all over the world, who also wish to contribute to the realization of the Auroville ideals.

7. Sri Aurobindo’s 150th birth anniversary

- 7.1. The Board advised the Secretary AF, to pursue the proposals for events, programmes and projects with Government of India and approved an initial budget for the programmes, events and projects of Rs. 50 Crores.
- 7.2. The Board expresses a strong aspiration that the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo may be the beginning of a new phase of accelerated development of the Auroville Township as the City for the Future, the Ideal Town and a Laboratory of Evolution as envisaged by the Mother.

8. Meetings of the Governing Board:

- 8.1. The Board decided to meet at least once in every quarter.
- 8.2. During these meetings the Board will review progress made with reference to work plans of the various Auroville working groups and the overall progress of Auroville’s development.

9. Conclusive remarks

- 9.1. Chairman and the Board appreciated the presentations made by the Working Committee, FAMC, ATDC and SAIIER.
- 9.2. The meeting concluded with a vote of thanks to the Chairman of the Board.

Collective Trauma

A catalogue of the emotional impact of recent events via Auronet.



As a therapist I know that one of the first steps to healing is to acknowledge trauma, whether individual or collective. This is an unusual article in that I invite the reader to hold and witness with compassion our inner and outer diversity as a community. There has been an intense atmosphere and this piece hopes that by acknowledging the emotions that are present, a repair of the rift can happen and our common unity can be discovered on a deeper level.

It's been at times an unbelievable period of community division. I was having trouble sleeping, and discovered in a work meeting that others too were having unsettling nights. JCBs have entered our psyche as Samrat noted: "I often catch myself listening for imaginary JCBs, such is the collective trauma that has burnt deep into the psyche of some of us", and now the sound of a truck or JCB triggers an emotional response for some. Many are feeling tired from the ongoing vigilance about what could suddenly happen next. There are WhatsApp and Telegram groups constantly pinging, and our nerves could well be pinging, too. Alain Bernard, pioneer Aurovilian returned recently to what he called "Auroville at war. There is no other word to describe adequately what is going on."

The Horror

On the morning of the first JCB action in Bliss Forest, I was walking past two old timers when, with a slow pathos, one of them commented "Horreur". Something of this sense was conveyed by Hemant from the Working Committee who wrote that "all this has shaken me and everyone around me in Auroville to the core and in the larger family in India and worldwide. Utterly distraught, utter dismay, disheartened sadness or any other words are hard to express my feelings. Trampling of the youth under the tyres of a JCB is like running chainsaws on our future." Similarly Elvira, with her wealth of working with conflicts and difficulties through Koodam, noted that "never have I seen levels of fear, pain, hopelessness, mistrust, division and aggression that come even close to where we are now."

Shock

There is shock at how the forest and youth buildings were cleared. Not just at the pain of destruction, inevitable in any forest clearing, especially in the setting of Auroville, but also in the manner in which they were done. This was powerfully expressed by Manas. "I was going to school just before eight on Thursday, when I passed the Youth Centre being torn down. I stopped and went in. What I saw was so shocking that I was paralyzed. A man in white, carrying a photo of the Mother and some framed writing, was coordinating a group of local people and a set of JCBs to demolish the buildings. It wasn't the violence itself that punched me in the gut, but the idea that the violence was being perpetrated in the name of the Mother. It was violence with divine sanction. The emotions were so painful that I went into denial."

The shock of the degree of polarisation was widespread, and Maël captured this when he wrote a letter to the wider community 'family' that he had grown up with. "I am shocked that none of you have apologised to the young people who were traumatised by the events of 4 and 5 December. I am shocked that none of you bothered to contact the Secretary and the TDC to let them know that their actions did not reflect the ideals and aspirations of Auroville, but rather jeopardised them. ... In spite of

everything, I am hopeful that as members of the same family we can come together hand in hand to build this city together. But it will not happen without an apology, without each of us taking the time to express our wounds in all vulnerability, and to listen to those of others."

Auroville Values and Ideals

Cherished ideals and values of Auroville life have felt punctured. Martin Littlewood wrote, "Although I am very sad about the destruction of our trees and our Youth Centre, and am heartbroken to see the clearcutting of forest, I am most sad about the destruction of our Auroville values. Values such as caring for our neighbours, integrity, compassion and goodwill. To see actions such as violence, verbal and physical abuse, the use of the police and hired locals to enforce our decisions, all condoned in the name of progress, is a clear indication for me that our dearest values have been abandoned."

Nico describes the strength of the impact of the clearances. "The next morning, sick in bed, I received information that a bunch of people from Koot Road had come under the leadership of (an Aurovilian) waving around a picture of Mother with the Koot Road Panchayat with JCB's, and started taking down the buildings and trees, shoving, shouting insults. This as you know turned out to be a disaster and disgrace to the values we cherish in Auroville. Seeing the videos destroyed me. I was helpless in bed, crying, in pain, sobbing, in disbelief of what I was witnessing. I knew this day would come. I knew it for a long time. But the way this was done is a stain so dark I personally will remember this event and the people responsible for it until I leave my body. I never thought that it would ever happen like this. I am devastated and deeply hurt. Not from the loss of some old buildings, but by the loss of Auroville ideals."

Clearly the repercussions of what happened will take time to be processed. Hopefully quicker than our last major collective trauma, the SAS battles from forty years ago, referred to by some in disbelief that they had returned. However, there are signs that some people are being tempered and changed through the polarisation that has been going on. Samai wrote of how in the midst of receiving racial slurs and challenges, he noticed that whilst "I've struggled with aggression and have never purposefully aggressed any living creature without being aggressed first, Thursday was amazingly challenging for me, but at the end of the day I patted my own back. Proud moment and I thank the universe for the lesson. During this whole ordeal, I even had a few reciprocated smiles with the 'hired muscle' as it was quite comical, the absurdity of the situation."

There have been frequent remarks from those promoting the Crown Right of Way, of their frustration with the community for not following through on the Master Plan and a feeling that the city project is being stalled. There is a frustration with the challenges to the Crown, that perhaps a vital part of the Galaxy plan is being questioned, especially now with funds and energy available to start building the city infrastructure. A fear that the city vision so fundamental to Auroville is being challenged. This frustration welcomed the Crown development starting as soon as possible. Whilst tangible, the frustration has not yet been as publicly written about.

However, Lavkamad wrote he was concerned that further clearing work on the road would be blocked. "Dear friends, I am very much worried about the petition to the RA to stop all work on the

Crown Road thus to block the development of Auroville for coming years." He adds that, "This petition is the best way to kill the City of Dawn, experiment on Human Unity. It would show that we have failed the test on Human Unity and the growth on the path of consciousness. We have an opportunity to build the City of Dawn and a choice either to miss this opportunity and taking the path of confrontation or to take the opportunity to build the city." However, he added, "I am having understanding for the feelings of the few, who are being displaced."

Hopelessness

Inevitably when decisions are made unilaterally, there is a feeling of helplessness. Shama recalled that "I have worked in and for the TDC, I have also been frustrated by the slow way things pan out, by the various groups and NIMBYisms, by the lack of motivation and support from Residents Assembly. But never would I, despite my frustrations, fall into the trap of using brute force on my fellow beings. This is wrong on an entirely different level and totally unjustified. I feel utterly helpless about where this is going, completely lost by the Governing Board's apparent acceptance of 'by all means'. And more than anything, devastated by fellow Aurovilians who stand behind this - many of whom I had thought of so highly."

Youth

Part of the reason for the distress was the decision to start the road and demolition of buildings in a much-loved haven for generations of youth of Auroville. It thrust the youth into the front line of a communal split. They managed to keep a mature presence belying their age and this gives hope for a better future. In the midst of destruction, the 'Peaceful City' youth centre has hosted presentations, clean ups and get togethers. Hemant acknowledged this with a "salute to the spirit of youth of Auroville, who have made destruction into an event of celebration, by coming together to rebuild the Youth Centre. You are my heroes."

Nico catches this quality of the youth: "I went to the meetings at Youth Centre before the destruction happened and I can assure you that there was no resistance whatsoever from the youth to stand in the way of the demolition of the buildings and construction of the crown."

Matilde also noticed this spirit. "I start to see the young ones who will rise from these dark days as leaders to all of us not far from today with a pleasure difficult to describe." Samrat, himself an Ashram child, observed that "Yes, the youth have the resilience to bounce back as all young people do, and we witnessed how the community got together in the next days to support them."

Fear

There has been at times an atmosphere of fear in the air, with many foreigners anxious of visa cancellations if they get too publicly prominent. Gijs highlighted this. "I want to bring the fear into the light, because I am ashamed of feeling fear but I am more scared of the shame I will feel after standing by".

Another aspect of fear was touched on by Edgar: "I personally don't like what I have lived these days but I'm proud of how we didn't react to the aggression with the same coin, and we let the fear pass through us and replaced it with peace and OM. Hopefully now we can build this Crown all together with care."

Responsibility

Healing often starts with accountability. Arun from the Working Committee, was one of those who apologised: "I feel very sorry for the incidents that have happened in the last few days. I am deeply hurt to see my community members in this situation. Let's also take this as a learning opportunity to build our unity and a better future for Auroville."

Inge adds that, "Without taking accountability for the experiences of violation, hurt and betrayal that a part of this community has lived, we are missing the point. I am certain that there are experiences of deep hurt and betrayal on 'both sides'. Without a dialogue and transformative resolutions, the crevasses in the fabric of our unity will remain and any semblance of unity will continue to have a shadow of 'what if this happens again?' Inge invites us "to speak to each other. I invite you to be brave and to trust that beautiful things can emerge when we embrace all the different experiences as opportunities to learn."

Nico movingly shared responsibility for how the Youth Centre was set up over twenty years ago: "With a heavy heart, I wanted to comment also on the Youth Centre and recent happenings. I was there when the decision was taken to place the building on the Crown. I helped build it. I guess it was a protest. But I was too young or naive to really understand it. ... Today, I somewhat share the burden of having left this responsibility on the youth and I feel heavy about it."

Elder interventions

Thankfully there have been moments when eldership, reconciliation and wisdom have carried the day and reduced the emotional dichotomies, and allowed a more collaborative perspective to surface. These include alternative road plans being offered by Darkali and the Youth Centre, and people being asked to non-violently witness the JCBs arrive to start their work. I saw two people who were verbally clashing in the recent first RA meeting share a quiet reconciling hug some minutes later. Enea wanted: "to bring attention to one magical and calming moment (perhaps the only one) that I witnessed during a General Meeting at Unity Pavilion: It was just starting, and the levels of chaos, general unrest, and confusion were reaching absurd heights. At that point Narad intervened with a calmness, born from the higher planes, and he asked: 'Will you all chant Aum with me.' He repeated this several times before the people present were able to return to any semblance of order. The chanting broke the spell of madness that had only moments before gripped all those present. This action allowed the meeting to start, when just moments earlier it seemed hopeless."

Possible Next Steps

Chali from the Working Committee points to a possible way forward: "I hope and pray that this kind of thing never happens again among us, that it is agreed that divisive forces and tactics are unacceptable in Auroville, that the deep hurt and wounds and rifts that have been caused will be acknowledged as something real and regrettable, that we can all dig deep and find a way to build the city and walk the path of an evolution of consciousness in a spirit of creativity, exploration, experimentation, flexibility, pragmatism and open-mindedness, with all our diversity and differences, while acknowledging and embracing our common love and commitment to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo."

Compiled by Peter

Letters

From the Auroville International Advisory Council

11 December 2021

To: Respected Members of the Governing Board

Like so many friends and well-wishers of Auroville, we have been pained by the polarization that has come into the Auroville Community, and it is imperative that we as a Council stay above such divisions. We understand the anger over the use of the police, and we understand the frustration of those who want to see the agreed upon development plan move forward. For sure, there have been missteps on all sides, but we are advising everyone not to linger in the anger and blame, but to work individually to calm emotions, step down and invoke the Mother. By allowing the vilification of the “other” we are working against the Mother’s ideal of human unity. This will not lead to a good result. To help with a cooling off period and to begin rebuilding trust, we would like to offer, in a spirit of goodwill for all, the following recommendations for everyone’s consideration, and assure you of our readiness to help in any way we can:

1. Let all sides refrain from bringing in external agencies to resolve Auroville’s internal issues, because it is not only an admission of failure, which will leave deep scars that will divide the community for a long time to come; it will also vitiate the atmosphere that might otherwise still bring about an internal resolution of issues.
2. In particular, to resolve disagreements among Aurovilians, we advise not to have recourse to call agencies of the state such as police or courts or to seek warrants, since that is explicitly against Mother’s will expressed on several occasions — “No army, no police” in particular.
3. We call on all to remember that in Mother’s own saying, the manner in which Auroville is built is as important, possibly more, than the outcome: “It’s not when Auroville has been completed: it’s the nations’ collaboration in creating something [that matters] – but creating something founded on the Truth instead of a rivalry in Falsehood’s creation. [What matters] is not when Auroville is ready – when Auroville is ready, it will be one city among all other cities and it’s only its own capacity of truth that will have power, but that ...remains to be seen.” (21 September 1966) Therefore it is incumbent on all of us to help towards this “foundation on the Truth” and trust right now, not in a distant future.
4. We call for an actual practice of inclusiveness: differing views and perspectives are unavoidable, yet Auroville’s challenge is to bring them together and find ways to harmonize them. In particular: (1) Many experts in Auroville have done outstanding work in many fields; this expertise and experience must be fully utilized in the planning of a city;
- (2) A first step could be to identify common ground, such as any area of the development of the future city that stake-holders and experts will all agree on, and focus on that initially, rather than on contending issues; (3) Given recent developments, and Auroville’s outstanding work in eco-restoration for decades, which has earned it world-wide respect, a thorough environmental audit, by respected and independent experts, of current and future plans seems an urgent necessity.

Members of the International Advisory Council
Gabi Gillessen, Michel Danino, Hashmukh P. Rama, David Frawley, Dena Merriam

From Dr. Karan Singh, former Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation

Dear Aurovilians,

I have been distressed at reports of deep divisions and tensions in Auroville. As I mentioned in my farewell message, the next great challenge before Auroville is to begin building the city which has already been greatly delayed. My advice is for everyone to keep calm and cooperate in the work of the Master Plan which was approved by the Government of India and notified during my term as Chairman.

If we believe that the Force of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is focussed on Auroville, then perhaps these events also have a certain value in forcing Aurovilians to look deeply within and introspect on their own actions and behaviour over the decades. The Hammer of God is usually a painful experience to begin but, hopefully, it eventually leads to a beautiful metamorphosis.

Warm greetings to you all,

Karan Singh

From the Board of Auroville International

Dear Dr. Jayanti Ravi,

Dear friends of the Auroville Working Committee,

It is with great dismay that we have learnt of the recent developments in Auroville and the major police operation which has led to several arrests among Auroville residents.

We are especially concerned that this event has taken place in the eve of Sri Aurobindo’s Mahasamadhi and that it has happened at a place which has been created by and for the youth of Auroville. We see it as a devastating sign in the light of Auroville’s efforts, which AVI is supporting by all means, to attract youth from all over the world, as also stipulated by the Governing Board in the minutes of its recent meeting.

We urge all those involved in these operations to restrain themselves and take all necessary measures to de-escalate the situation in a spirit of mutual understanding and collaboration. We are very concerned that an aggravation of this conflict would only create a further and deeper division in the Auroville community as well as inner wounds that might take quite some time to heal, thus hampering the ideal of human unity we are all striving for.

Respectfully yours,

The Board of Auroville International

From former Auroville International Advisory Council members to the Chairman, Governing Board, Auroville Foundation

Dear Shri R. N. Ravi,

Having served on the International Advisory Council of Auroville for a number of years, many of us have a deep admiration for Auroville and its accomplishments and have made lasting friendships with many Aurovilians.

Recent alarming reports from trustworthy sources of conflict, intimidation and a police presence are not in the spirit of Auroville’s ideals which we were invited to promote and protect. These incidents have already been reported in local and national media and international social networking platforms.

We are aware of the difficulty of your task and hope that in this auspicious year of Sri Aurobindo’s sesquicentennial when the world’s eyes will be turned towards his legacy that harmony prevails above all else.

Most sincerely,
Mark Tully, Vishakha Desai, Shaunaka Rishi Das, Kabir Shaikh, Julian Lines, Doudou Diene, Marc Luyckx Ghisi

From the Board of Directors of Auroville International USA

As Auroville moves through this collective challenge, we invite you to join us in holding hope that solutions can be found that honor the dignity of all parties and align with Auroville’s capacity to flourish. We invite you to spend a few minutes today in silence and/or prayer for Auroville during this challenging moment when many community members are feeling sad, afraid, frustrated, and angry. Take a pause to remember what you love about Auroville; what inspires you and lights up your heart, and send some of that love to Auroville and to all Aurovilians. When we join our hearts together in holding hope, it makes a difference. We are part of one unified fabric that holds all creation, and what we emanate into this network ripples out and has a real effect.

Sri Aurobindo said that “All problems of existence are problems of harmony.” Harmony is not easily achieved, but when all sides of any argument see each other as humans with complex concerns and motivations, a way forward can be found that harmonizes and meets all needs. This is the prayer that we hold for Auroville at this time.

In a nutshell: perspectives on the Crown

While the vast majority of Aurovilians see a need for the Crown, differences exist concerning how it should be manifested. Here, in a summarized form, we present some of the major expressed differences in perspective, some of which have not been adequately fact-checked. However, it is an oversimplification to divide people into two ‘camps’, as many individuals agree to elements of both perspectives, and today there is a renewed wish for a solution that unites us. Alan

For Crown development by the ATDC based on the Master Plan

- 1) The Galaxy concept was created under Mother’s guidance and received her approval. The Crown is one of Roger Anger’s key ‘non-negotiables’ for manifesting the Galaxy as a means of linking the four zones. It is a key mobility and infrastructure corridor.
- 2) As such, it was an important part of the Master Plan, which was approved by the Residents Assembly in 1999 and subsequently gazetted by the Government of India.
- 3) No key changes were made between 1999 and what was sent to the Government of India in 2001.
- 4) This Master Plan is not for all land protection in Auroville. It states that it is only protecting land for the manifestation of Master Plan.
- 5) This Master Plan has been used for fund-raising activities and money has already been received. Nobody would have donated to Auroville if such a plan had not been there. The Government is prepared to invest large amounts in manifesting Mother’s city. We should show gratitude and work to achieve it.
- 6) The Youth Centre violated agreements many years ago by situating buildings and trees on the alignment of the Crown. This was a deliberate blocking act on city development.

- 7) One consequence of the stewards not allowing an infrastructure route through the Youth Centre and Bliss forest is that the last part of an urgently-needed High Tension cable, partly paid for by the Government, has not been allowed to be laid in the ground. This is causing a daily loss of Rs 5,000 to the Electrical Service.
- 8) Some do not want Mother’s city of 50,000 but a much smaller ‘eco-village’. They have deliberately stalled or blocked development with excuses that further studies are necessary.
- 9) Regarding alternative studies, no serious attempts have been made to integrate ground realities in a way which would not distort or block the development of the original Galaxy concept.
- 10) The Master Plan Perspective 2025 does not require a Detailed Development Plan for the Crown, radials and ring road, as these are Master Plan roads contained in the first 5 year plan.
- 11) The city is designed to be 50% green, and contains four city parks. The area of forest that would need to be cut for the Crown is a very small percentage (0.36%) of the total Master Plan area and for each tree cut, four will be replanted elsewhere. The space allocated to all roads in the Master Plan is only 1.64% of the Master Plan area.
- 12) People are sitting on ‘private estates’ in the city area and holding back manifestation of Mother’s city. It is selfish and unsustainable for 3,500 to occupy 3000 acres. And we are being selfish in taking decisions today without considering the needs of the 47, 000 who have yet to join Mother’s city.
- 13) There are double-standards. No environmentalists objected to clearing a large area of urban forest for a frisbee ground, but they object to a smaller area being cleared for the Crown. Moreover, while all the present buildings along the Crown were constructed without a Detailed Development Plan being in place, nobody objected to this.

For collaborative Crown development based on present realities

- 1) The Galaxy is a wonderful concept, accepted by the majority of Aurovilians. However, it is not cast in stone, but is to be interpreted and manifested collaboratively.
- 2) The Master Plan is an interpretation of the Galaxy; it was not approved by The Mother. The Master Plan was approved by the community in 1999 on the basis that only the four zones specified by The Mother were beyond discussion. It was agreed that the rest, including the Crown, had to be formulated collaboratively, not imposed.
- 3) The Master Plan which was gazetted by the government was different in some respects from the one which the community had voted on. The community had not endorsed the gazetted version, and it has been used for fund-raising without this wider endorsement. The Master Plan has also not been endorsed by the Tamil Nadu Government, which is responsible for land matters in the state.
- 4) The Youth Centre, Bliss and Forest Group had presented an alternative routing for the High Tension cable, which meant it could have been laid many months ago.
- 5) Nobody is trying to stall the development of the city. Various proposals have been presented to the Auroville Town Planning group over the years which have integrated ground realities while respecting the form and spirit of the Galaxy. However, all have been rejected because of a rigid interpretation of how the Galaxy needs to be manifested.
- 6) The forested areas of the city are key water catchment areas, helping ensure the city’s and the bioregion’s water supply. Cutting a wide road through these areas would destroy important water catchment and erosion control structures, as well as destroy a precious forested environment.
- 7) The Auroville Universal Township Master Plan Perspective 2025 specifies that certain steps need to be taken between formulating a concept plan and manifesting it on the ground. They include drawing up five year Detailed

- Development Plans, which would be reviewed at the end of each five year period, and Annual Plans with detailed plans and schemes. None of these have been done. The present ATDC wants to manifest roads without key studies, like socio-economic and mobility studies, being in place and agreed upon.
- 8) The present completed stretches of the Crown Road have seen uncontrolled motorized traffic. The Town Planning group says this is a mistake, and wants to prevent this on future stretches, but has not presented any way of doing this. They have even increased the width of the planned crown road from the width of the present stretches, so further encouraging fast-moving vehicles, which is against what Mother envisaged for the city.
 - 9) Manifesting the Crown as a perfect circle makes no sense on the ground. It is a dogmatic interpretation of one aspect of the Galaxy concept, an attempt to impose a rigid symbolism upon a developing city.
 - 10) The needs of the youth who benefitted from the Youth Centre which they have established have not been properly considered or addressed by our town planners.
 - 11) The planners have elevated principles above people. The city should evolve from the evolving consciousness of its inhabitants, not be imposed upon them. The planners also need to consider the needs of the present residents, like a need for more affordable housing, which should therefore be given a higher priority than more roads.
 - 12) The present Auroville Town Development Council lacks the professional expertise to do planning for the city.
 - 13) There is no hurry to finish the Crown. The sections already paved will serve the needs of 10,000 people by 2025.
 - 14) It makes no sense to preserve the same layout for the whole Crown. The Crown should adapt to the different environments it passes through, taking into account topography, present need, the existence of alternative routes etc.

A great work and some great lies

Green work in Auroville is lauded as a fantastic achievement of what can be done to transform a desert land into a green oasis – but other hidden aspects of this green work are not only negative but even extremely harmful for the Auroville Project.

On the positive side the most brilliant moment was when we discussed the Master Plan (MP) and the foresters and green-belters in general, after many discussions, decided to support this document. Everybody was extremely happy. This important document is laying down the foundations for the City that the Mother had envisaged and it was accepted in its integrity. The document was ratified by the RA in 1999 with an absolute majority of the residents, a consensus of more than 95 per cent.

This agreement is important for several reasons. Firstly, because it is safeguarding a model to integrate two different perspectives which all over the world are frequently in conflict, the respect for the environment and at the same time the respect for the development of the city. Secondly, because it has the potential to establish a solid base to collaborate and avoid many useless discussions and potential divisions.

Unfortunately, in the following years this agreement saw the appearance of an increasing number of disagreements that have put one of the most brilliant moments of our community in question. Most of these disagreements have come from a coalition of the same members of the forest people and some architects. This situation has culminated in

the tumultuous happenings of these last days.

When did it start to deviate? What are the main facts that have contributed to the present conflict? After watching with stomach pain what has happened in the last few days, I want to contribute some facts that can perhaps help to understand better the origin of some of the present problems we are facing. For example, in 2016 the main working groups of AV presented to the Foundation a plan from the Electrical Service to install a high tension underground cable alongside the Crown. This plan was approved by the Indian Government with an amount of almost 50 lakhs, and the project should have been finalized 2 months after the date of commencement. But the work was stopped by a number of people connected with the green groups and the youth center. Until today in December 2021 (5 years later!) this project has not yet been implemented despite all efforts and conversations, the two cable rolls are still lying at the opposite ends of the road, approx. 300 meters apart, and incur a daily loss of approximately Rs 5,000 according to the Electrical Service. AV has not implemented and has not returned this money to the GOI grant. This is only one fact but it is a telling behavior of some of the signatories of the MP.

There are other facts that can contribute to put same light on this conflict. For many years, forest members have been planting trees, sometimes precious trees in areas reserved for city construction and development. The same thing happened in the Youth Center, where the main building and the tree

planting was done on purpose in areas reserved for the future Crown. This indicates clearly a will of non-collaboration, and a lack of sincerity and honesty with respect to the MP. What are the reasons behind these actions? We can see now clearly that it was done to postpone, to create problems and to stop, if possible, any future city development. When did it start? This misconception started many years ago, probably soon after signing the MP or a little later if we judge by the size of the trees. This was an exercise of careful long-term planning. Why did the same members of the green people who had earlier agreed to the MP act in this way? My own interpretation is that when they were in need of certain powers to protect their huge areas of forest they were ready to sign any kind of agreement, even with the Indian administration, but they didn't have even the least intention to implement these agreements in the areas designated for the City development.

During the last years the pressure and critics against the MP increased constantly, this culminated some months ago when the green group and the Youth Centre openly presented their views in the Unity Pavilion in a 'general meeting' in which they put the Crown in question. At this moment it became officially clear that the consensus obtained by the absolute majority of this community around the Master Plan was broken and all their disastrous consequences were going to start.

With the announcement of the new Governing Board, all these internal contradictions exploded. The new Governing

Board explained their strong commitment to accelerate the building of the City, and offered big funding to AV for that. For the first time ever AV was going to have the necessary funds to start building the most urgent infrastructures. Clearly this is the BEST OPPORTUNITY that AV has had in its entire history to develop its City. Unfortunately, all these hidden factors by the green groups have surfaced also. The new secretary Madam Jayanti negotiated all the hot points in the construction of the Crown with all concerned, some knots were resolved, but in the end also all the falsehood came to the surface and the absolute refusal to implement the agreements made in the Master Plan that stands as the only legal document. Who is responsible for this "Ecological Catastrophe" that the same group is announcing in an out of proportion manner in all the media? In my opinion the group that decided to plant the trees in the areas reserved for construction.

It is equally clear that today this conglomerate of green members, and architects etc, supporting this option are substituting the Mother's dream by their exclusive Green Paradise dream, that will be the inevitable course of action if we are not able to stop it.

Sincerely,

Joseba

P.S. I was involved in the planning office and the Development group during the years of elaborating the Master Plan.

(First published on Auronet)

Why the resistance against Auroville's 'Crown' project is not justified

By blocking development in Auroville, the city's residents cannot claim to stand for 'human unity' - the premise on which it was founded in the 1960s.

The clearing of the Crown, Auroville's main urban path, once again met with resistance after 25 years of discussion and waiting, on December 4. The police had to be called to help the work proceed. There was no violence and no one was hurt, as it is being alleged.

These chaotic events and the organised polarisation of the community have been deeply saddening. A fact-check is the need of the hour.

Auroville cannot claim to stand for 'human unity' until the city announced and promised to the world in February 1968 is built together with agreements and concord.

Denying Auroville from realising itself as a city and the willful blockade of the Master Plan by an organised group who claim to speak for the whole of Auroville, through misinformation and petitions, have brought things to a standstill. Clearing the designated land for Auroville's Crown project has been stopped once again taking the rest of Auroville and its hopes for the future hostage. This is as grave as when the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) took Auroville to court based on wrong claims in 1975.

So, this orchestrated campaign of propaganda and defamations, in the name of human unity, needs to be examined.

Auroville over the years

Auroville was inaugurated in February 1968 with a charter and a city plan that the Mother - Mirra Alfassa, the spiritual leader who was the founder of Auroville - had herself commissioned, by inviting architect Roger Anger. She worked with him for three years to come to a model that was finally approved in January 1968. This came to be known as the Galaxy Plan and was displayed prominently at the entrance of Auroville's amphitheatre, where the Charter was then read out, welcoming the people of the world.

In December 1975, soon after the Mother passed away, the SAS filed an affidavit in a Pondicherry court claiming, among other things, legal ownership of land. The court case would stretch to 12 years in which the SAS took the matter to the Supreme Court claiming that Auroville was a religious body and, as such, the government could not interfere.

These were grave insinuations, threatening the very basis of Auroville and the principles on which it stands: non-ownership - as land and property belong to Auroville and not to any person or religion.

The 'City the Earth Needs' had been clearly defined: "Earth needs a place where men can live away from all national rivalries, social conventions, self-contradictory moralities and contending religions. A place where human beings, freed from all slavery to the past, can devote themselves wholly to the discovery and practice of the Divine Consciousness that is seeking to manifest. Auroville wants to be this place..."

The land bought in the name of the SAS was for building the city, the place to manifest those aims. It needs to be stated that the February 1968 plan had no green belt. The brief to the architect was for an experiment for humanity contained in a city for 50,000 people envisioned in such a way that there was a place for everything and everyone, and an urban area balance with over 50% green cover. Soon after, the architect also proposed a green belt around the city area. The Mother agreed to this provided it was used for agriculture to sustain the town.

Once the court case was settled in favour of Auroville and the Auroville Foundation Act passed in parliament, the land under the ownership of Sri Aurobindo Society was handed over to the Auroville Foundation for the development of the envisioned city and to carry out its life and activities.

Auroville started on a vast barren land, which by standard logic, would not be suitable for such a daring project. This did not deter the project from going ahead with the aim of finding the most innovative or direct solutions for the most material and spiritual problems of earth and humanity. This is the scope given in the Auroville Charter.

The early years saw dedicated work to regenerate the land and slowly turn it green and fertile. Much more happened in areas of renewable energy, water, education and culture, but these were not immediately visible. With the coming of the Auroville Foundation Act, certain processes were put in place by the Governing Board, like the Master Plan, needed for the development of this unique city.

This brought the first open resistance against the city plan. But after two years of dialogue, a near-unanimous agreement was reached and the process was followed through with approvals and the Master Plan published in the Gazette of India in 2010.

A lobby responsible for stalling development in Auroville

Unfortunately, the narrative around Auroville began to shift even as the Master Plan was being formulated and the media messaging about Auroville morphed from 'City of the Future' to assertions of an eco-village, forest city, sustainability and lifestyles. At first, this shrunk and changed paradigm went unnoticed till it became a small but dominant lobby interfering with the development of the city.

Despite the Master Plan being in place and its key elements ratified by the Residents Assembly, which included the Crown, the development of the town was stalled for over 20 years citing trees, environmental and topographical concerns. Those who opposed development did not offer proposals that would successfully integrate with the Plan.

The interim years saw trees deliberately being planted over sections of the Crown, making it inaccessible for Aurovilians. Blocking work on key sections of this Plan area

had become a pattern. Land ownership came into practice under the excuse of trees. Areas designated for the city under the Master Plan were taken over without process or permissions. In the process, trees were planted without consulting the plans for the area; and the area was declared as a forest.

While one came to hear statements of support for the city plan in public, it was met with stone-walling in practice. This includes matters regarding Auroville's detailed development plans, its land protection and roads which have been repeatedly and systematically stalled with excuses for further studies, dialogue or process.

The latest attempt at stalling work is the demand for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) before completing the remaining work on the Crown and even changing the Master Plan. Given that over 40% of the Crown is already complete along with buildings funded by the Government of India, the latest demand by those opposing the project becomes all the more questionable. Holding up the Crown would mean holding up the new pedestrian-friendly mobility, adding to the pollution, retarding Auroville's urban centre and increasing the financial burden.

Changing a conventional municipal plan may be possible by conventional means, but a visionary plan supported by a charter to hold an experiment is a very different matter.

Auroville already has three million trees, roughly 1,000 trees per person of the present population. For trees removed, re-plantation is planned in Auroville's green zones. On the other hand, Auroville's work on renewable energy remains exemplary.

Unfortunately, a section of youth has been influenced and misled by all this for years. Some of them feel quite differently about all that is happening, but are too intimidated to speak up. Given the lack of education regarding the project they inhabit, they have come to believe that nothing should be done to harm the 'forest'.

The Youth Centre was placed where it is now, on a temporary basis, with documented agreements that no buildings would be built there and no obstruction would be made when the road needed to come. All these agreements have been flouted due to obstruction. Not collaborating has been the norm over the years prompted by some. This has only legitimised the impunity of these actions.

What should have been an internal matter for Auroville has now been blown out of proportion with claims of external threat. This 'conflict' orchestrated via media and petitions and the targeting of people who they view as 'enemy' in the name of human unity need to be debunked and the future unblocked.

Anu Majumdar

(First published in The Wire on 18th December)

Why Auroville needs to be a model of exemplary development practice

What Aurovilians are asking for is a town planning process that upholds and reflects the ideals of 'the city the earth needs'.

A response to an article by Anu Majumdar titled *Why the Resistance against Auroville's 'Crown' project is not justified*, published in *The Wire* on 17th December.

In her article, Anu Majumdar has painted a picture of a “willful blockade of the Master Plan by an organised group” in the international township of Auroville in Tamil Nadu. She claims that “no violence” occurred in authorities’ recent forceful bulldozing to implement the Crown way, a proposed 4-km circular road within Auroville.

Let’s consider the facts, starting with a short account of two recent events.

It’s around midnight on Saturday, December 5. JCB bulldozers leave the parking area in front of the office of the Secretariat of the Auroville Foundation, and make their way towards Auroville’s Youth Centre. Members of Auroville’s Working Committee – a body selected by the community to represent them, of which Anu Majumdar is a current member – and members of the Auroville Town Development Council (ATDC) are seen in the building in what appears to be a late-night meeting.

Soon after, the bulldozers crash through the forest close to the Youth Centre, where six scared young resident Aurovilians call out for help as the bulldozers head to demolish structures. As community members rush in on two-wheelers to support the youth, they are stopped at multiple police checkpoints that have been preemptively set up on all access roads. At the Youth Centre, police officers grab some of the youth and bundle them into a police vehicle, taking their phones.

At the height of the chaos, Working Committee members are called and asked to intervene (so was the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, who apparently hung up the phone). They succeed in halting the mayhem, and later publish individual statements reflecting how they were “shocked to the core” by the event, which aimed to forcibly implement the Crown way.

In a community meeting called the following day to process the traumatic events, over 500 Aurovilians signed a statement which asserted their commitment to peaceful, collaborative urban planning processes, and which rejected “violence, threats and actions which undermine community processes and our collective work.”

Despite this clear statement by the community to the authorities, the intimidation and aggressive tactics continued. In another appalling incident on December 9, bulldozers again arrived early morning at the Youth Centre, accompanied by large groups of people from outside the community, some of whom confirmed they were paid to physically enforce the clearance. They proceeded to raze buildings to the ground and reportedly instigated violent scenes, despite the peaceful protest measures of the Auroville residents. Further bulldozing without necessary work orders and other aggressive measures took place within the week of December 4 to 10. During those six days, 900 trees were felled, some of them, preserved species.

Majumdar suggests that the conflict has largely been “orchestrated via media and petitions”, none of which had actually occurred before the midnight bulldozing (December 5). If anything contributed to a crisis situation, it was the lack of communication to residents from Auroville’s authorities, and those residents working closely with them, such as Majumdar.

So what is this conflict really about?

The crux of the ongoing conflict in Auroville is not about whether Auroville will develop, but about how. And if Auroville is to realize the vision of its founder, the Mother, of being “the city the earth needs”, its development practice ought to be exemplary. “If this is how we are going to build Auroville, which is supposed to be an expression of spiritual consciousness – in the middle of the night,

in the presence of police – then this is not the Auroville that I want to live in,” shared a resident youth.

In recent months, since the arrival of a new government-appointed Secretary to the Auroville Foundation, the pressure exerted by authorities on the Auroville community to implement the Master Plan has increased in intensity, and has focused on rapid development of the Crown way.

“Those who opposed development did not offer proposals that would successfully integrate with the Plan,” writes Majumdar.

This is simply false. The two most directly-affected communities within Auroville that lie on the Crown way (Darkali and Bliss Forest/Youth Centre) recently presented their alternative development proposals to ATDC, showing how the Crown concept could be slightly adapted to preserve precious forest and water catchment systems that are vital to the whole bioregion.

The Darkali stewards proposed an alternate route just a few meters away, in a proposal backed up with detailed maps and documentation, which would avoid their largest and oldest trees and would keep thriving water bodies intact. (Darkali alone harvests three million litres of fresh water, which can support the drinking requirements of one lakh people). Other alternative proposals presented by residents were elegant solutions that met the key criteria for the Crown Road as defined in the Master Plan.

However, Majumdar and Auroville authorities, including the ATDC – which lacks planning expertise and contains some members appointed in questionable processes – ignored these proposals. Instead, they assert that the Crown must manifest as a perfect circle shape, a symbolism which they allegedly believe has a particular power that will aid the spiritual evolution of Auroville.

Instead of collaborating with the community in the planning process, the ATDC blindsided the community with sudden bulldozing. The furtive late-night meetings, lack of communication and sudden bulldozing suggests the covert manner in which some authorities and some community members are currently operating – against the values of a community that has long claimed to be an experiment in human unity and collaboration.

Majumdar claims “there was no violence, and no one was hurt” in the process of clearing for the Crown, but numerous videos circulating on social media demonstrate that this is simply not true.

Majumdar has painted a picture of a “willful blockade of the Master Plan by an organised group”, but other members of her own Working Committee team (the elected body) were unaware of these late-night arrangements for a sudden and forceful implementation of the Master Plan by a small group of Aurovilians who are not acting on behalf of the community.

The larger part of the community has requested a pause of all development on the Crown until further notice, to allow time to define a harmonious way forward. According to the Auroville Foundation Act (1988), the Residents’ Assembly (one of the three authorities of the Auroville Foundation) is to consult in the formulation and implementation of the Master Plan (section 17 (e)). But Majumdar and others who feel frustrated that the physical development of the city is not happening fast enough are today claiming that a community decision-making process on this topic is illegitimate, and have attempted to override the Residents Assembly, whose role is enshrined in Indian law.

Majumdar claims that implementation of the Master Plan has been stalled for 20 years due to



The ribbon marks one side of the planned road clearing: it will destroy a water catchment area and a stretch of old forest

“trees, environmental and topographical concerns”. Yet the Master Plan 2001 itself states (in section 2.9.7) that an “Environmental Management process... will be integrated within all development, planning and urban design elements.” Rather than blocking the Master Plan, the community’s call for an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) aims to ensure the plan is upheld in the best possible way. Auroville’s International Advisory Council has also called for the same.

Suhasini Ayer, one of Auroville’s leading architects and town planning consultants – who recently won the Green Solutions Award at COP26 for a residential project on the Crown – emphasises that the Master Plan itself is not being disputed. Her concern – shared by many Auroville residents and expert town planners – is the need for development to take into account the local (and global) challenges, notably ecological sensitivity and the need to preserve important water catchment areas, given the bioregion is on the brink of a water scarcity crisis. Today, if Auroville wants to demonstrate exemplary development, it needs to provide local solutions to such global challenges, in a truly participative way.

Mobility plan and afforestation

While Majumdar claims that “Holding up the Crown would mean holding up the new pedestrian-friendly mobility, adding to the pollution”, a key concern amongst residents is that a mobility plan has not been done.

The already-developed stretches of the Crown Road have dramatically increased motorised traffic, therefore the mobility plan needs to consider how further development of the Crown will manage the anticipated increase in regional traffic wanting to use the Crown and other Auroville roads as a thoroughfare between two nearby highways.

The planned ‘right-of-way’ clearing of the Crown Road would also require the felling of approximately 150,000 trees and shrubs of Tropical Dry Evergreen forest species, some of which are endangered trees. Auroville’s re-afforestation work is globally-recognised for reviving this rare forest type, and any professional planners would integrate trees of value into development proposals. “What message does it send out to the world,” exclaimed one resident, “that in Auroville, we destroy forests to build a city?”

Majumdar has said in her article that many of the 900 trees bulldozed last week were “deliberately being planted over sections of the Crown” as a way to block its development. While there is truth in her claim that the Youth Centre was intentionally placed years ago on the Crown Road, the other area that was bulldozed into last week, a forest sanctuary

named Darkali, is another matter altogether.

In contrast to Majumdar’s claim that “trees were planted without consulting the plans for the area”, the stewards of Darkali had earlier, in accordance with the ATDC’s wishes, planted trees to the side of where the future Crown Road would be laid. They were then told in recent years by ATDC that the road had been moved (in the plan), and it would now run through the path of these special trees.

Majumdar mentions the French architect Roger Anger, saying that “Auroville cannot claim to stand for ‘human unity’ until the city announced and promised to the world in February 1968 is built together with agreements and concord.” Indeed, the majority of residents are attempting to move forward in this spirit of collaboration (despite authorities’ heavy-handed tactics), while keeping in mind Anger’s statement that the main aim of Auroville was to grow new human beings, and that the city would have to evolve in accordance with the evolution of consciousness of its residents.

In response to Majumdar’s statement that the recent Stay Order on clearing (issued by the National Green Tribunal) allegedly takes “the rest of Auroville and its hopes for the future hostage,” a youth of Auroville poignantly posted on Auroville’s online forum, “We can stand for

human unity in so many ways that have nothing to do with building the city. But to say, we can only stand for human unity until the city is built, is holding our spiritual progress hostage.”

Interpretation and imposition of an outdated plan goes against the spirit of the original Master Plan itself, which states that it will “neither be traditional, nor static and rigid” (Master Plan Perspective 2025, section 2.11.1). The Plan has in-built review processes, including 5-yearly Detailed Development Plans – which have never been done. Rather than being against the Master Plan, as Majumdar portrays it, what Aurovilians are asking for is that the Master Plan actually be respected and upheld “as a visionary plan supported by a charter to hold an experiment”, by following processes designed for it to yield the development of a township that reflects and sustains the unique trajectory of an experimental society.

The “orchestrated” petitions that Majumdar refers to is most likely the global support that is now flowing towards the Auroville community for its commitment to building the city in a collaborative, peaceful and ecologically-sensitive manner – as the petition (currently at 33,000 signatures) and many letters from high-level dignitaries indicate.

If Auroville is to demonstrate exemplary development practice, it must find a way to:

1. Urbanise while upholding the exemplary ecological work it is known for today;
2. Uphold its uniquely participatory mode of decision-making, which is enshrined in Indian law (The Auroville Foundation Act 1988);
3. Be led by the ideals set forth in its Charter, which say that Auroville will be a place of “unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages” and “a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity.”

The community’s own architects and urban planners are right now undertaking a collaborative brain-storming process (the Dreamweavers method) to integrate the Galaxy concept and Master Plan framework, while being sensitive to local conditions. They will soon offer their findings to ATDC and the Auroville Foundation, in the hope of fruitful collaboration with authorities.

Lakshmi Venugopal, Tejaswini
First published in ‘The Wire’

Auroville’s Master Plan is based on a Galaxy model developed in the 1960s by French architect Roger Anger, in collaboration with the Mother. After Mother’s time, this concept was developed into a Master Plan (1999, 2001). The plan takes the form of a policy framework or concept note, and it lacks the required Detailed Development Plans (DDPs) which are necessary to flesh out the plan’s sketches before moving towards implementation. The 20-year-old Plan also needs to be updated to take into account the present-day ground realities and environmental concerns. A number of Auroville residents with expertise in town planning have – in the spirit of collaboration – conducted studies in recent years and offered their integrative proposals to authorities.

Trying to understand the divine game plan

Frederick, who came to India in 1966 and has been living in Auroville ever since its inception in 1968, gives his view of the recent happenings.

In the beginning I was quite close to our new Secretary, Dr. Jayanti Ravi. Many people, myself included, were very happy when we learned that she had been selected to become the new Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. As she had been working closely with Kireet Joshi, we had high hopes that something of the spirit which Kireet had embedded in his work as Chairman of the Auroville Foundation would also filter through her. When I met her the first time, she told me that the only Aurovilian Kireet had been talking about had been me. So it was a happy opening.

But my positive feelings were not shared by all Aurovilians I spoke to. The Secretary has an incredible energy and drive. She has met with a great number of people, and has shaken Auroville up and out of its comfort zones. But many people felt that anything they told her that did not agree with her views was not listened to, or was only given casual attention. In my case, my advice regarding the Vodaphone cell phone tower, the Youth Centre and the Darkali Forest was not heeded.

I often felt impelled to try again, to meet her and convince her to take another direction. At least six or seven times I attempted just that. But though our interactions were always cordial and friendly, my suggestions went unheeded. In our last meeting the tone changed: I was pressured to collaborate in the manifestation of the Crown. But I am not acting under pressure; this is the worst thing you can do to me. You bully me, you put pressure on me, you coerce me, I will give the opposite response. So I replied that I would do what I have to do. Like Luther, when he said “Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.”

Obstruction or sanity?

So when next morning the bulldozers came to Darkali, I was there. My son-in-law Sukrit hurried over to me and told me that my daughter was in trouble, sitting in front of a tree and refusing to move away. My first impulse was to protect my daughter and I rushed down. But there was no violence. Aurosyll was quietly explaining that this is a forest. The official spokespersons of the Foundation were there as well. We were standing on a corridor which had already been cleared by the residents of Darkali themselves, a corridor which was intended to be used for the Crown. But the Foundation representatives did not want to follow the stretch that was cleared, and insisted on clearing the beautiful forest a few metres to the side, which has grown over the last 50 years. For that was the exact circle of the Crown, 638 metres from the Banyan tree. They also didn’t care that in doing so, they also would destroy a large water catchment area which is essential for Auroville and the neighbouring villages. For me, this is insane. I took the tape to show them that a small deviation from the holy 638 metres wouldn’t even be noticed – but they wouldn’t listen. And now I am accused of obstruction and the Auroville Foundation has filed a police complaint against me.

Fear and Plan B

It brings in fear, a real fear, and I cannot deny that I am suffering from it, especially at 2 o’clock in the morning, the hour of the demons. I understand all those non-Indians who are looking at the conflict from the sidelines and do not want to get involved. The entire story has once again exposed the weakness of the position of foreigners in Auroville. Many are afraid to speak out, for fear of vindictive actions and ultimately the loss of their right to stay in India. And that is not an idle fear. We all know the names of long term Auroville residents of foreign origin who were not allowed to ever come back to Auroville, with the Government not giving any reason for its decision.

So then you start thinking of ‘Plan B’, which means leaving Auroville for another place. For many Aurovilians, this would be an

unimaginable scenario, as they, like me, have spent all their savings in Auroville, have no money left, and are of an age where they would not be able to even find employment in their home country. When I surrendered all my material possessions to The Mother – it was a very considerable sum of money – I felt an immense joy and liberation, and I believe I could not have done what I did afterwards if I hadn’t done this. But now, in this situation, there is sometimes a nagging doubt coming up if I did the right thing. And that cuts deep. The Doubting Thomas cannot be easily dismissed. Recently, because of Covid’s travel restrictions, I had to spend nine months in France and Germany. I visited the places where I had grown up and I realized that I could live there. Plan B, in my case, would be the *vanaprastha*, the forest dweller, and I realized that it doesn’t really matter where that ‘forest’ is. But living without funds will not be easy.

Trying to find the deeper meaning

I have reflected a lot on the deeper meaning of what has been happening. There is, as Mother has said, something of a divine game plan, where each person gets a window where he or she has to act. All the influential actors of the past, such as Shyamsundar Jhunjhunwala, Satprem, Kireet Joshi, Pranab Bhattacharya, Navajata, had a particular role to play at one given moment. Without them, there would have been a missing piece. But the problem is always that the ego attaches itself to what they are meant to do, and then it becomes a ‘personal’ agenda. The Secretary spoke to me that she had seen the manifestation of the Crown as her low-hanging fruit. But there are so many low-hanging fruits. The infamous apple in the Garden of Eden was also a low-hanging fruit. But was there a true need to go that way?

In the multiplicity and diversity of Auroville, each one plays a certain role. It makes judging people almost impossible. I cannot say what is the right and true thing to do for anybody. I hardly know if I myself have always been doing the right and true thing. Looking at the happenings from a deeper level, I realize that it doesn’t help to further the polemic that ‘they are bad’ and ‘we are good’; we have to get to an approach that looks at oneness, the underlying oneness in which we all are connected. But the seeking for that oneness is not a happy all-holds-hands affair; it is painful, it is like an electric wire and when you touch it, you get a shock. So this Sunday morning I asked Sri Aurobindo, “What is your message for me?” and the word which sprung up from *Savitri* was “laughter”. I was stunned – forests are cleared, people are depressed or very upset and this is the answer? But I realised that there is an emerging lightness behind it all. We got so serious and so heavy, because the continental plates of Auroville have moved. We are in the process of the dance of Shiva, and that is often painful.

Looking back I realize that we, the residents, have been at fault as well. We know that the Auroville Foundation Act has recognized the Residents’ Assembly as one of its three authorities, but we have not properly executed that power, probably because there is a fear of power abuse. But nature abhors a vacuum, and then other elements come in to fill that gap. We are now starting again with meetings of the Residents’ Assembly; let us hope that there is a sanity coming in, that we can look for that which has brought us here, has united us and which again can bring us together.

Going through the religious phase

I had another internal reflection on the belief of those who think that the Charter of Auroville and the Galaxy Plan are at the same level, and that if you go against it, you go against what The Mother wanted. Some would call this adhering to a religion. And then I realized that I, and many of my friends, have also gone through a religious phase, and

that going through such a phase may be much more common than people think. In my experience, many in search of oneness with the Divine, the Unio Mystica, go through that phase where suddenly you get tired and cling to symbols and forms and make those the carrier and ignore the living content. Some of us in the fight with the Sri Aurobindo Society had the same obsession. I remember that and regret it. I was caught in it, too.

I have been trying to understand it. Sri Aurobindo writes about the ordinary mental level, an easy and necessary level where we coordinate things, and about higher levels. I believe that many of us have reached such a higher level. But the problem is that that higher level doesn’t give the full truth. They touch a portion of the truth and cling to it and think ‘that is the truth’. But what is absolutely necessary is to realize that there are many, many, many other truths. It is the story of the blind men touching the elephant.

So can we challenge the belief system of those who cling to the perfect circle or cling to the radials or cling to whatever Mother has said and wish to see that carved in stone? Can we challenge the belief system of those who want to grow organic? Can each of us perhaps see that the truth we hold is incomplete, a truth with a twist, so to say? More importantly, is it possible to combine two movements in a higher harmony? Can we all step back, realize that none of us is the guardian of the holy grail, look each other in the eye, get away from the computer and the digital communication, and meet, soul to soul, heart to heart?

Please no spiritual Disneyland

Then, of course, there is the ‘outside’. I am happy that the Government of India has set up a 53-member High Level Committee of former Prime Ministers, actors and spiritual leaders to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo at national and international levels. Sri Aurobindo is one of India’s national figures and has spoken about India as the guru of the world. For far too long, he has remained unknown and it is good that India and the world come to know about him and The Mother.

In this context Auroville has its role to play. The Mother gave her reasons for the creation of Auroville in that memorable talk with Satprem on February 3rd, 1968:

India has become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of present-day humanity. India will be the site of its resurrection, the resurrection of a higher and truer life.

And the clear vision: the same thing which in the history of the universe has made the earth the symbolic representation of the universe so as to be able to concentrate the work at one point, the same phenomenon is occurring now: India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that there will be the... cure. And it is for that – it is FOR THAT that I had to create Auroville.

So Auroville cannot escape being involved in the human difficulties and it is the *dharma* of the Aurovilians to try working them out. That could well mean that it will take many years for Auroville to grow and develop. I had a fear when I read the minutes of the 57th Governing Board meeting [*elsewhere in this issue, eds.*] and their approval of these large Government of India grants of 51 crores this financial year and 250 crores in each of the four successive years. My fear is that there is an intention to make Auroville a shining showpiece of a smart city, a spiritual Disneyland, with a vedic embroidery around it. But that would be a mockery and not correspond to the true *raison d’être* of Auroville.

In conversation with Carel

Take a stand against the toxic narrative

Open letter to the Working Committee and the Auroville Town Development Council

In the aftermath of the recent Residents’ Assembly Meeting, I have tried to understand and introspect the inner resistance that I have been feeling towards “moving on”. A lot of things do not feel right. A few specific points come to me that make my heart beat faster and my breath catch in my throat, and that leave me with a deep sense of fear, disconnect and discomfort on a human level.

I do not want to talk about the Crown Road and I also do not want to talk about the Auroville Foundation Office, nor the Governing Board. But I will say one thing: humility-masked victory-dances showing up at the first Residents’ Assembly Meeting felt like a slap in the face to all who personally experienced the sanctioned physical violence at the Youth Centre and Dharkali, myself included

I want to talk about our Auroville.

I want to share with you the deep sadness that I feel and the lack of confidence that I have in our working groups, namely the Working Committee and the Auroville Town Development Council, for the failure to take accountability as a group for the actions and inactions that have occurred these past weeks, and for failing to publicly acknowledge let alone apologize for how things went down.

I don’t care that I don’t see eye to eye with you; Anbu, Antim, Anu, Joel, Lakshay,

Sindhuja, Srimoyi, Toby, and Toine, but I do care that you care about me and others, on a human level. How can you stand by and do nothing in the face of physical violence? With your silence you are endorsing these actions. I need to trust you as compassionate human beings in this journey with me, human beings who have discernment between their intention and the lived and experienced impact of their intentions and actions. Without this trust on a human level, a growing disconnect with our beautiful community members is happening.

Having served in the working groups myself, I have faced challenging conflicts and faced my own shortcomings, assumptions, and the impact of certain choices that I made that hurt people. The first step in healing these things inside myself was to take stock and detach from the shame or feelings of ‘losing face’. In my experience, and in this context, there is nothing that an honest apology cannot bridge. In fact, an honest apology shows strength, perspective, and can build self-esteem and confidence. We all make mistakes and it is part of the human experience to be and do better everyday. Can you call this a mistake?

Without this, personally speaking, I refuse to “move on”; not because the little me that I am require closure from an external entity, (I can do that for myself) but because as the young society that we are, we need to establish

and act by morals as a higher standard than any law. Whether we follow a legal process or act lawfully is not the question here (although many aspects of this issue would classify as illegal). Our social norms and the aspiration of Auroville demands discipline and morality above laws from each of us, and from our community representatives all the more. The said working groups need to acknowledge and take accountability for the human experiences that have taken place as a direct result of their actions and inactions.

Without taking accountability for the experiences of violation, hurt and betrayal that a part of this community has lived, we are missing the point.

I am certain that there are experiences of deep hurt and betrayal on “both sides”. Without a dialogue and transformative resolutions, the crevasses in the fabric of our unity will remain and any semblance of unity will continue to have a shadow of ‘what if this happens again?’

This is a fundamental human rights issue under international law. If the Working Committee and ATDC don’t take a clear stand right now condemning the use of physical violence for development in Auroville and acknowledge that the use of hired forces and JCBs coming unannounced to destroy infrastructure at 8 am WHILE SOMEONE IS INSIDE THE BUILDING SLEEPING, is an

illegal, atrocious, injurious, abusive, and damaging act, there is little room for reparation or restoring trust.

This is a fundamental human rights issue under international law. The sad skeleton of victim blaming, trauma dismissal and emotional invalidation shouts that the youth deserved this because “the Youth Centre was purposely built on the Crown Road” and therefore “had it coming”. I cannot believe it nor understand it. I have literally no words. Who are we? We are better than that. I am afraid that in the pursuit of a noble cause we are allowing our humanity to die a pitiful death. I don’t stand for this. “No remorse” and “past is past” won’t cut it here.

This toxic narrative needs to change, and we need to speak to each other. I invite you to be brave and to trust that beautiful things can emerge when we embrace all the different experiences as opportunities to learn. I can promise you that each of you who sincerely comes forward to listen and feel the impact of certain decisions you made, will open the door for the emergence of something higher and truer. Moving on without doing so will remain as a stain on Auroville, an unhealed collective wound and a memory of a time where we didn’t stand for basic human rights.

I invite you to be brave. I stand with you.

Inge van Alphen

Phoenix emerging: The Youth Centre starts anew

Since the shock of the destruction of the buildings and forest clearance, the Youth Center (YC) has been receiving support and appreciation from the community. Volunteers are cleaning up and repairing what they can, and food is being cooked and offered. Both before and after the destruction, YC team member Lili recalls that “people came together in an extraordinary way: those who had been here in their early years and those who hadn’t, but wanted to support the youth.”

Everyday it’s been evident to those of us who cycle past that there is a hum of activity; bikes are parked outside, rubble being cleared by volunteers, items are being salvaged. The YC is adapting itself to a very new environment. The destruction was a traumatic time with a visible raw legacy, but people have rallied to support the YC. Adults are staying to create a sense of safety for the remaining youth. The kitchen was destroyed but a makeshift replacement enables Vijaya, who has been at the YC since its inception, to continue making lunch and teas. People have brought food and there has been a non-stop procession of baking. “We’ve had a lot of pizza and we aim to continue the pizza nights,” Lili noted.

There have been two very well attended events in the YC. Firstly, Omar and David hosted a presentation for the youth about their Dream Weaving approach to planning. “We sent a text out to the youth and they forwarded it. I was expecting 15 people to come”. The repeatedly forwarded text meant that eventually hundreds of people turned up at the Youth Centre to listen and with a wish to participate in city planning. Lili observed, “People care deeply about being a part of the process. Luckily we had a vegan pot luck already planned, and enough food was brought to host people with.”

Two days later, on 18 December, there was a community gathering. Annually around Christmas time there is a fair, with food stalls and music, and they had originally been planning for it on 17/18/19 December. Lili comments that they wanted the “community to witness the destruction that took place and a decision



Meeting at the Youth Centre

was made to put something together”. That ‘something’ became a late afternoon and evening event called ‘Gem of the Forest’ with the symbol of a phoenix on the poster. It started with a chanting invocation, and then the soulful voice and music of Rando and Bullet Proof Funk had many people dancing. This was followed by the Genius Brothers who sang three songs with a short memorial silence. They skillfully walked the tightrope of solemnity and fun that the occasion demanded. Finally, Johnny and Jesse produced a youth adaption of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, fittingly titled ‘Katharsis’. Hundreds of people enjoyed a special Auroville night in the forest, with a fire, massages being offered, children running around excitedly, with pizza being baked and people catching up with friends, YC t-shirts being offered and flowers being given on

arrival. It was a night both of pathos and joy that hit just the right note.

The YC and youth have been given a “wake up call,” says Lili. “We want to participate in planning. We are educating ourselves to know how to express ourselves and each other about the processes, structure and decision making methods of Auroville and how to move forward.”

Prior to the destruction, over fifty youth, with the support of Paul Blanchflower and other adults, had presented the ATDC with a new Crown road plan for the YC. “In this plan, near the current stage, a plaza was planned as a public space for and by YC with art and theatre.” The art would “make everyone feel welcome; Aurovilians, our neighbours, bio region kids. We are adapting to the ground realities of the destruction and putting a new proposal in place.” Given her theatrical training, Lili is particularly keen on the plaza concept, where theatrical performances could take place. She also mentions how important it is to be in a forest, how arborists have taught youth about trees and watersheds, particularly the Bliss Forest Stewards. She wants a Vocational Training Centre where local crafts and skills can be taught, especially those indigenous to the bioregion. Lili makes a plea for the YC and youth “to be allowed to make mistakes”, and that spirit of generosity and maturity is surely one that the community can embrace.

When you walk under the ‘Peaceful City’ archway, you come across one of the original caravans in which idealists came here in the late 60s from Paris, with the energy to turn a barren landscape into a restored and blossoming greenery. The symbolism of this historic vehicle that is now divided from the Youth Centre by a gash in the forest is painful. Hopefully this symbol from our pioneering origins will remind the youth, our future Aurovilians, that restoration is possible.

Peter

Instagram: youthcenterauroville
Youtube: YouthCenterAuroville

REFLECTION

The larger learning?

It is always foolhardy to offer conclusions when the dust has yet to settle during a major turmoil or, when, indeed, controversy is still roiling the community. But sometimes it helps to take a little distance from the heat of events and try to draw out some of the main threads, the underlying issues and possible future courses of action.

So here are a few very tentative suggestions.

1) Without discussing the rights and wrongs of what happened, it is clear that many Aurovilians have been deeply shocked, even traumatized, by the events of the past few days. The sight of local villagers assisting JCBs to uproot trees and demolish buildings in Auroville communities felt like an assault upon something very precious, which is our common humanity. But that assault began before the JCBs moved in. It began when we started stereotyping each other, dividing individuals into groups which were ‘pro-city’ and ‘anti-city’; when there were accusations of broken promises, and the good faith and the intentions of certain Aurovilians and groups were being questioned; when the ATDC and the Working Committee failed to communicate effectively with the community; and when AuroNet as well as other media were extensively used to propagate and justify particular views and agendas and to denigrate, often in extreme terms, those with whom people disagreed.

The inevitable casualty has been trust. A chasm has opened up in the community between individuals and certain groups or members of groups, and between individuals and individuals who are perceived to be in different ‘camps’.

What is urgently needed now is some kind of truth and reconciliation process in which we not only clarify the veracity of certain events, but take responsibility and apologise, when necessary, for any hurt we have caused. We need to learn to see each other again as individuals, with all our faults, shortcomings and aspirations, rather than simply as labels. For when we label others, we depersonalize them, and this allows us to act towards them in ways we would never consider if they remained for us simply human beings with different views. In other words, we are being called to make a supreme effort; to refuse anger, hatred, and all thoughts of violence towards those we disagree with, and to strive to replace it with genuine love and compassion, based upon the understanding that we are all flawed individuals with a very limited understanding of the larger forces surrounding us here. For if we return anger for anger, distrust for distrust, we may end up being consumed by the negative energies which are being generated. We have seen this happen before. We must not let it happen again.

2) The JCBs did not come from nowhere, not can the blame for the present crisis be laid at the feet of a new Secretary and Governing Board who wish the city to be constructed speedily, although this may have been a precipitating factor. Almost from the beginning of Auroville, there has been a tension between those who wanted to construct the city as soon as possible and those who favoured a more gradualist, environmentally-sensitive approach. There have been occasions when the different perspectives have worked together, for example

during the Auroville Resource Centre experiment in the late 1980s, but such collaborations have been short-lived.

The failure of our Residents Assembly process to reconcile and integrate these two perspectives, as well as a dysfunctional bureaucracy, town planning and decision-making process which blocked or delayed any form of development, created huge frustration in those who felt that it was taking far too long for the city to be manifested. It led, among other things, to people with city development agendas getting themselves elected to working groups which were intended to represent the wider interests of the community as a whole, and to crucial steps in the planning process outlined in the Perspective Plan being ignored. The incursion of the JCBs became only the latest, and crudest, attempt by some frustrated individuals to cut this Gordian knot.

But the failure was not only collective. Almost all of us are responsible to some degree for the present locked-in situation in which some Aurovilians feel that other Aurovilians don’t want the city, and have committed ‘violence’ by deliberately building or planting trees on the alignment of the Crown, while other Aurovilians feel that a dogmatic group is intent on forcing through its limited perception of how the city should develop.

For even if we have not taken strong positions on one side or the other, we have often provided tacit support for one position or the other, and, even if we claim impartiality, we have allowed the conflict to continue and not contributed to finding a genuinely integral solution.

3) Mother pointed out that an experiment of the scale and significance of Auroville would inevitably attract powerful occult forces which would seek to disrupt or destroy it. One of the most powerful ways they do this is to sow disunity among Aurovilians. Their recent success in doing this is obvious: regrettably, there has even been something of a nationalist divide in the way in which different cultures have aligned themselves on this issue. Sowing discord is made easier for the anti-evolutionary forces when people seek power and influence, but it also happens because sometimes, even often, we find it very hard to distinguish between those forces which support the true development of Auroville and those which oppose it.

The recent destructiveness, both physical and psychological, has been interpreted by some as the ‘Hammer of God’, or the transformative action of Kali, while others have claimed that their actions are motivated by a divine ‘adesh’ or direct guidance from The Mother. God, indeed, works in a mysterious way, and is not bound by our notions of morality or ‘correctness’. But Mother warned of the danger of false prophets, and extremist, divisive tendencies often masquerade as instruments of the Divine.

In this context, it cannot be accidental that the first requirement she specified for being a ‘true Aurovilian’ was to discover that “being free, vast and knowing...who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville”. For without making this discovery, or without identifying ourselves directly with The Mother’s consciousness, it is difficult to discriminate between true and the false lights and to know what the divine intention is at any moment.

In the interim, however, she proffered some useful advice to a sadhaka who wanted to know how to tell truth from falsehood:

However, to help at the beginning, one can take as a guiding rule that all that brings with it or creates peace, faith, joy, harmony, wideness, unity and ascending growth comes from the Truth, while all that carries with it restlessness, doubt, scepticism, sorrow, discord, discouragement and despair comes straight from the falsehood.

4) Both Hegel and Nietzsche felt that conflict was an essential ingredient of progress. Without subscribing to this philosophy, conflict can be transformational as well as confrontational, for it can evoke new or previously latent qualities. The youth, for example, who are in some ways the prime victims of the current imbroglio, have displayed great maturity and resilience in the way they have responded to the destruction of the Youth Centre buildings, welcoming the community once more to their gatherings and activities. This, among other reasons, has evoked many offers to help them rebuild it in a place acceptable to everyone.

The recent dramatic threats to our unity have also helped bring many of us back to centre, to remind us of why we are here, and given a renewed impetus to efforts at collaboration and finding new ways of solving our differences. For, as Mother pointed out, apparent differences can be resolved by rising to a higher consciousness where there are no contradictions. Now that we have experienced such disunity, there seems a strong willingness in some sections of the community to find ways of repairing our social fabric and moving forward together. As one of them emphasized, “No one is against the city, but we need to find ways to build it which bring us together, not drive us apart”. For the ‘city the earth needs’ cannot be built upon a fractured community.

One such promising initiative is ‘Dreamweaving’, where Auroville architects of all ‘denominations’ will try to attain a shared vision on ways of developing the Crown. Another is the peace gatherings and meditations which seek to restore harmony and call for a higher guidance.

This conflict has also laid bare the failings in our collective process, so hopefully this will give a huge push to ongoing efforts at stimulating more effective communication between the Residents Assembly and major working groups, and new forms of decision-making and implementation which are more inclusive, and more closely aligned with our ideals.

It is still far too early to assess the fallout of recent events. And further dislocation may be on the horizon. But if there is one thing we can offer Mother, as an alchemical transformation of the darkness, it is a renewed determination to build her city in the right way, a city which is not merely material but, above all, a city which is the manifestation of true community based on the transformation of human nature. No 25 year development plan exists for such a city. For it is built or destroyed at every moment of our lives through our every action, thought, or moment of true aspiration.

Perhaps, after all, this is the most important lesson we are being asked to learn at this critical moment in Auroville’s history.

Alan

Water, water everywhere

This has been a record year for the rains. Weather-watchers divide our year into a dry season (January – May), the South West monsoon (June – September) and the North West monsoon (October – December). This year saw excess rains in all three periods. Charlie (Aurogreen) measured 489 mm in the dry season, 380% above the 44 year average, 557 mm during the South west monsoon, almost 42% above average, and 1753 mm during our main North East monsoon, which is almost 111% above average. The rains in November alone totalled almost our annual average!

The grand total for the year so far - 2798 mm – almost 111% more than the annual average, not only broke Charlie’s Auroville records but was the highest annual rain total in this region since Pondicherry city began keeping records in 1911.

One Aurovilian rain recorder logged an even higher figure. On 14th December, when the North East monsoon was withdrawing, Tom had logged a total of 2955 mm for the year in Invocation, while, further to the south in Ravena, Jaap logged 2675 mm.

As Paul Vincent wittily remarked on Auronet, “This year, God went to sleep and forgot to close the valves”.

But even these figures don’t give the full picture. Charlie notes that it rained on 109 days this year, while another 17 days were trace days. So on more than one in three days we experienced rain. Moreover, at times the rain was unprecedentedly heavy. On 20th November, in one half hour period, Akash in Maitreye recorded 8.4 centimetres, and 10.5 centimetres within the hour, surely another record.

It was this downpour which almost swept away three Aurovilians who were returning from a birthday party. “The

water suddenly turned into a wild river pulling me,” reported Dariya. “Trying to keep my balance I kept going, knowing if I fall the river will take me”. In a canyon which also serves as a road, a car got stuck and the driver had to spend the whole night in it. That same night, the popular Tanto restaurant in Kuilapalayam was flooded. But the team and the customers were undeterred. “The Tanto team is so brave,” reported Daniel, the manager. “We did 30000 rupees worth of orders that night, with clients sitting in the water”.

Cecilia used a break in the rains to put her termite-attacked books out in the sun. Unfortunately, the rains returned before she could rescue them. It left her philosophical. “In the realm of books, it appears that termite ladies will always have the last word, and if not the termites, the rains will wash them off, reminding us of the impermanence of things”.

Inevitably, our water structures couldn’t cope. Bunds broke and water gushed down roads which had inadequate run-off. One Aurovilian suggested that funds be put aside for a Bund Board which would strengthen and remake the bunding systems created over the years. Another suggested that the sides of the Matrimandir lake excavation should not be waterproofed but serve as a water catchment basin for the aquifers below, while another pointed out that bunds and groundwater recharge areas must now become planning priorities. For if, as the Indian Meteorological Office believes, our region is in for an almost doubling of the yearly precipitation on a permanent basis, we will need to redesign our roads, bunds and much else with this in mind.

Meanwhile, the villagers were also badly affected. Kolams overflowed, destroying roads and flooding houses.

But there were gains as well as losses. The aquifers, which were becoming

depleted year by year, have benefitted immensely from the rains, causing the water level in Auroville’s wells to rise, and Tom’s careful measurements suggest that the second aquifer may be regaining the pressure it had been losing.

Finally , Aurovik reminded us what Mother had expressed:

The rain – it is like a Grace that god sends to bless the earth and to purify it. It is this that gives life to Nature and the animals. It has an extraordinary power of purification. As soon as the rain comes down, it purifies the atmosphere of all the negative formations that we throw in the air and the harmful forces that constantly try to destroy us...

In which case, perhaps we can never get enough of it!

Alan

PASSING

Bernard Borg

Born in Tunis, Tunisia, on the 4th October 1946, Bernard Borg moved in 1961 with his family to Marseille, in France, while he was still a young boy of 15. He was a French “pieds noirs” (black feet) as repatriated people from Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco used to be called. In Marseille, he studied for a few years at the school of the Beaux Arts, and he always kept alive a strong aspiration for beauty and art.

Early 1969, he left Marseille for India with his wife, Claude, to be part of the great adventure of Auroville. They arrived in Pondicherry in March and went to live in Promesse where Aurokali was born a few months later. Then they shifted to Pondicherry and worked at Kali Guest House while teaching in the Ashram school. It wasn’t Bernard’s idea to be in the Ashram and it did not suit his restless and undisciplined temperament. Nevertheless, it gave him the wonderful opportunity to meet The Mother every Wednesday.

At the end of 1972, Mother asked Bernard to shift to Auroville. About him she remarked: “We have been severe to this man, don’t you find a change in him? I feel that there is an aspiration in him.” And that’s how Bernard, Claude and Kali finally moved to the storeroom of Auroson’s home, in Certitude, turning it into a nice little house. During this time, Bernard started extracting pebbles behind Promesse for the construction of Auroville.

After a year, the family moved to Aspiration. While there, Bernard bought a lorry and a tractor to transport materials for the construction of Matrimandir. Possessing only basic English, he also did some fund raising in India with Alain Bernard. A very funny idea and a good experience! But it is through these attempts, these impulses and actions that we learn the only indispensable thing: how to stay tuned to the “Mother”’s frequency”.

In the meantime, in 1974, a second little girl had arrived, Aurokripa, born in a hut in Aspiration.



A few years later, on the 29th May 1976, what should have remained a splendid joke, an unbridled act of youngsters – the event of the taking over of Navajata’s “Aspiration Hut”– turned badly: eight Aurovilians found themselves in prison the same evening, taken away like criminals by armed police.

Bernard was one of them, of course. Auroville was shaken, divided, violently bruised at times, but after the intervention of the Central Government, freed in large part from the power of the Agency that was supposed to protect it, Auroville continued its path.

Bernard remained very present during these years. The graft had taken well. But other trials were to come, one after another, like waves in a storm.

It was Satprem, a brother who helped so many willing Aurovilians to keep their eyes on Mother who was the one who wiped out the bulk of the storm. And then, again, time passed, the difficulties took another form... the Administration, for the new status of Auroville was not Bernard’s strong point.

From Aspiration, they moved to Auromodèle. There, Bernard had several cows and started a little farm. Claude planted, planted and planted over 50,000 trees in Auromodèle

area. Many of the big trees today are standing straight, witnessing the labour of that time.

In 1976, they moved to a chosen piece of land near Certitude, between Pitchandikulam and the construction site of the Matrimandir. Bernard named it Sharnga, the name of Krishna’s bow which never misses its target.

The family moved onto the land in a rudimentary shed. Satprem came several times to Sharnga to visit Bernard, Claude and the little Kali and Kripa.

The house to be built was designed in jail by Bernard and Jean Pougault. The structure of the roof was built in Toujours Mieux, Aspiration, and carried across the fields by foot to Sharnga by 50 men. That was really another time...

Sharnga is Bernard’s personal story...

During these years, the struggle to secure Auroville continued. There was to be another arrest of a much larger group of people gathered around the Banyan Tree, who were kept in custody for a few days in Villupuram jailhouse. Bernard, of course, was again part of them.

One can only remember a few of the projects that took place in Sharnga because Bernard was not short of daring dreams! In the early days, he set out to produce tomatoes for Pour Tous. He grew them under large nets, but the heat was too much. The next project was a dairy. It is not clear how long it lasted, but one day the cows left Sharnga to form the start of Aspiration Farm.

Soon after, Bernard started his most useless project, the most ambitious, the most difficult, but the most aesthetic. He fell in love with a horse called Ashwa. He decided to breed and raise thoroughbred horses destined to race in Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai. The horses were beautiful, but they needed fresh rain, drizzle, soft ground and tender grass, and as Auroville could not compete with Normandy, everything had to be created artificially. It was an endless, colossal job, against a nature more favourable to the goats and the small cows of Tamil-Nadu.

But the horses were beautiful... The dream was stronger than the hurdles.

Land was bought, the farm grew, water ponds, grazing fields, training tracks were built, and Sharnga expanded. As the community grew, grazing fields were transformed into residential houses. Finally, in 1993, the horse breeding activity exhausted itself, and the stables were transformed to welcome Newcomers. So many Aurovilians came for the first time to Auroville and got hooked, connected, touched, while living in Sharnga.

Meanwhile, Bernard had a new family, a third little girl was born to him and Sigrid, his new partner. Mirrabelle was born in 1995 and the area slowly grew into the beautiful lush guest house we know today. Bernard’s life went on with another wife, Shanti and her daughter, Saoumya, that he took in.

So many remember Bernard’s character, with the generosity of a heart bigger than words can express, a very strong vitality, loving to provoke, shout, extremely sensitive and always expecting the best from people. He was totally in love with Mother. He had given himself to her, and was completely devoted to her Dream.

Pioneer, artist, creator, builder, he worked with an inexhaustible energy, walking and pacing Sharnga all day, all night, doing, following, having everything under his scrutiny and control. When he would sit with his guests and friends for dinner he would entirely open up, share and communicate something of the essential with the people in front of him, and many have been moved, called, and connected with The Mother through him. He had the gift not to judge, and he believed in people when everybody else had given up on them.

The last months of his life demonstrated the love, devotion and surrender he had for Her. In full trust, and as Her son, he gave himself back to Her.

The night before his last day he felt an intense well being and, a few hours later, peacefully left us with a deep breath on the 28th of November 2021 at 5:20 pm.

Kripa

Surya Mani

With deepest sadness Auroville mourned the loss of one its young: Surya, son of Mani and Saroja of Douceur met in the early hours of Sunday 5 December with a road accident near Pondicherry and passed away due to his injuries. He was 25 years old.

Surya had finished his higher education here in Auroville and had recently started working with the new Solar Kitchen team.

After the body was received from Jipmer hospital, the last rights were honoured at his parental house at Douceur, and the cremation took place at 6pm the same day at the Auroville Mandappam near Adventure, with many Aurovilians, young and old, as well as friends from surrounding villages attending.



Peggy Rustomji

In the early morning of 15 December, Peggy, the mother of Jehangir and Rishad Rustomji, first generation of students of Auroville, passed away in her home in Kodaikanal. Both her sons were with her during the time of transition.

Some of us affectionately remember her sitting in the school bus that would bring students and teachers from the Ashram and Pondicherry to Auroville in the seventies, in those halcyon days when we embarked on the Auroville adventure on an empty canvas.

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