

Four designs for the new Matrimandir gardens

Recently, the process of finalizing the designs of the next four Matrimandir gardens to be constructed – Light, Life, Power and Wealth – was completed and work on Life and Power, the two smaller gardens, will begin in a month. How were these designs arrived at, and do they represent a community wide shift in how the Matrimandir gardens are to be viewed and experienced? We spoke to Aurosyllé and Hemant, two of the Matrimandir executives who were involved in the process, to find out more.

Auroville Today: Was the process for these four gardens different from that followed for the Garden of the Unexpected (see Auroville Today no 355, February, 2019)?

Hemant: We followed almost the same process, but there were two or three things mentioned in the feedback to that process which we tried to remedy. For example, it was felt there was community participation only at the end of process, so we provided opportunities for this to happen throughout the process. This time around 105 Aurovilians signed up to be part of the panel which made the final design choice, and of these 75 sent feedback only at the final stage. But throughout the process only about three or four community members gave feedback, and very few people attended the general meeting where the chosen designers presented their work before integration. This was disappointing.

The other weakness of the previous process was there was not much feedback from the experts' panel to the designers. This time we not only had an excellent panel of experts – including Narad, who was made chairman, as well as eminent landscape architects from India, France, Thailand and Japan – but they also gave very useful advice both to the participants and to those of us who were designing the process. Before the main design call went out, we did a community review of the four existing gardens which told us which gardens the community liked best, and why. The Thai expert (in a letter to Narad who agreed) pointed out this information was very important, so we included it in the design brief for the new gardens.

What were some of those findings from that community survey?

Hemant: The community wanted seating and more trees for shade in the gardens, and gardens that were more natural (there was a concern about the overuse of concrete in the existing gardens), less geometrical. And they wanted the designs to be enjoyed and appreciated on the ground rather than from a bird's-eye view. They were also concerned about sustainability, particularly regarding water usage, and wanted gardens which could evolve, change over time.

Aurosyllé: In this connection, they wanted less hardscape, constructed, features.

Hemant: Even though we limited the hardscape to 15% in the design brief for the new gardens, many of the initial designs we received were very hardscape – the designers were simply following design patterns of gardens elsewhere –



Artist's Impression of the Garden of Life

so these were filtered out. Initially, 102 registrations were received and 34 concepts were submitted. Of these, 17 made it to the final stage for detailed design submission. Ten detailed designs were submitted by designers. The technical and expert panels reduced these to the top three designs, while taking into consideration four Community panel members feedback. All ten designs were displayed in the Unity Pavilion to get feedback from the community, who were also asked to choose the lead design from the top three for the process of integration.

Aurosyllé: Unlike for the Garden of the Unexpected, only one Aurovilian came forward with designs for these gardens, and this didn't make it to the final stage. We are not sure why so few designers from Auroville participated.

Hemant: All of the three selected designers came from India, but only one had visited Auroville before. The others knew something about the project through their contacts with Auroville architects.

However, as they didn't know the specific ethos of Auroville, initially they went about designing the gardens in the way they would normally do, that is in a very architectural manner. This is not surprising. In India there is no history of this kind of gardening, which requires a much more fluid approach, like the Japanese way of gardening which Mother appreciated so much.

So when the experts reviewed their initial designs, they commented they needed to be changed. But the biggest changes took place when the three chosen designers came to Auroville for ten days and were asked to come up with one integrated design for the four gardens.

How did the integration process go?

Hemant: To begin with, I took them on an extensive tour of Auroville, talking to everybody who had expertise in this area and other long-time Aurovilians. One of the big learnings for the chosen designers was that they realised they knew very little about plants.

Aurosyllé: And about ecology in general.

Hemant: Then they spent every night here changing and integrating their designs – they agreed there should not be one lead designer – and finally they came up with something very different from any of their original conceptions.

How was it different?

Hemant: Initially two of the designs were very geometrical, while the third, most popular, design was too open, undefined. However, it provided a template for the other two. The designers say that in the final design all the important aspects of the earlier designs are still there, but now there's a much more fluid movement from one garden to the other.

So the overall shift is away from sculptured to more people-friendly gardens?

Hemant: Yes. And while ecology was a secondary concern in those earlier Matrimandir gardens, now it's more important.

Does this mean that some of Roger's original guidelines for the gardens have been dropped? For example, he mentioned that the gardens will be like a jewel in a jewel box. Has that idea been abandoned?

Hemant: The basic guidelines, like the layout of the radial pathways, the width of the paths, the separation of each garden into "Petal" and "Garden" sections, and the presence of a different

dominant hibiscus in ten of the twelve gardens, are still there. But I told the designers that what is most important in the design brief is the feedback the community has given on the first four gardens. Because while I don't see any single designer being able to bring down the spirit of Life or Power into these gardens, I do see a high collective aspiration. And while we want to keep the aspiration of what Mother said, in the physical we need to manifest what the community wants at this moment.

After two years these new gardens will be reviewed by the Design Evaluation Panel, made up of community experts in landscape, engineering and Integral Yoga, chosen by the community to make all design evaluations in Matrimandir, who will also incorporate what the larger community feels about these gardens. This is understood and has been accepted by the designers.

Has the overall process received larger acceptance?

Hemant: Most people feel the process has worked well this time. Jacqueline, who collaborated with Roger for many years, has accepted the outcome, and Narad wants to actively participate in the manifestation, and there's a consensus among everyone else involved.

How did the professional designers respond to this process?

Hemant: They enjoyed it, even though they received one or two very severe criticisms. In any case, they are used to dealing with clients who can be problematic. What was quite different for them was having to integrate their designs. Normally, once a designer is chosen they don't have to consider other designs. But in this case the integration requirement stimulated them to come up with something even better than their individual efforts.

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The four new gardens and their location relative to the Matrimandir (top right), the Banyan Tree (dotted circle down left) and the amphitheatre (bottom right corner).

1.1 and 1.2 – Garden of Light; 2 – Garden of Life; 3 – Garden of Power; and 4 – Garden of Wealth.

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The four new Matrimandir gardens

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The new Matrimandir Gardens design team.
From left: Anandit Sachdev, Vir Shah, Rupal Rathore

One of the conditions for the designers of the Garden of the Unexpected was that they would remain on site to supervise the work. Is it the same for the designers of these four gardens?

Hemant: Yes. We're still trying to work out how this can happen. If it can't be arranged, we will get an Aurovilian to continue the work. But then the person on the ground would be deciding how the design manifests, not the designers, because you can't have remote authorisations.

When will the actual work begin?

Hemant: We will begin the work next month with Life and Power, which are the two smaller gardens by the Banyan tree.

Where does this leave the existing gardens? Will they also be modified in the light of the community's wish for more 'user-friendly' gardens?

Aurosylle: The garden of Bliss might get a tree.

Changes have been taking place in the Garden of Existence, with an arrangement of crystals replacing the central boulder. What was the process followed here?



The crystal arrangement in the Garden of Existence

Hemant: The community survey told us that the central layout in this garden was not liked, so we wondered how to change it. We sent out a request for suggestions, but nobody responded. However, Michael Bonke had proposed eight years ago to put crystals in that garden and was still pushing to do it. Initially, we planned to put the crystals in one of the non-developed gardens so that people could see how they looked: only if the community liked them would they be placed in the Garden of Existence.

However, we discovered it would cost fifteen lakhs to set them up in a non-developed garden, and another ten lakhs to move them again. And some of the crystals might be damaged in the process. So we decided to put them directly in the Existence garden and if, after two years, the community decides it doesn't like them, we will bring back the boulder (which, at present, is in the Garden of the Unexpected).

Aurosylle: It's important to remain open to the future. Hopefully, one day we will be able to move from consciousness to consciousness and garden to garden. As Mother told Narad:

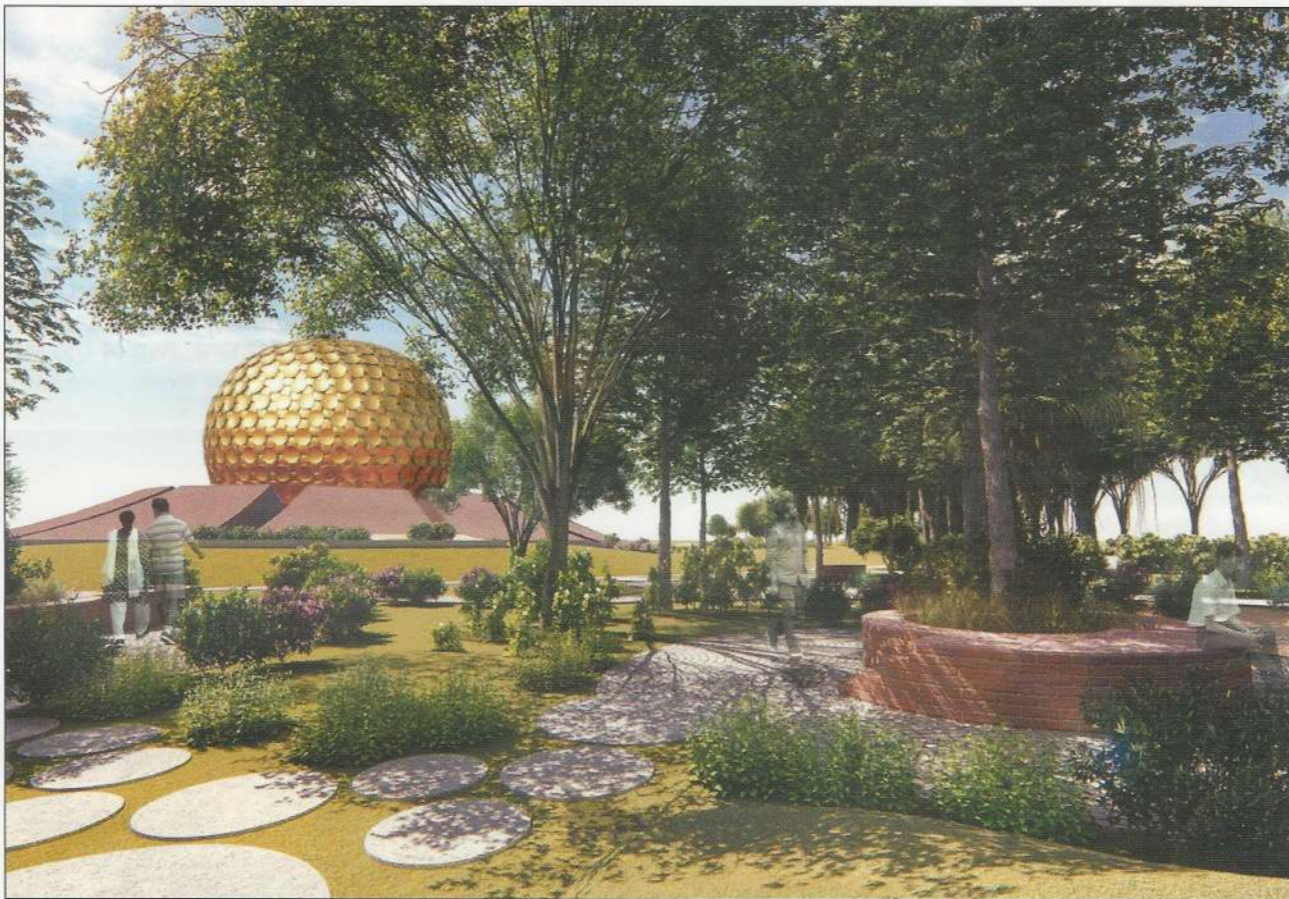
It must be a thing of great beauty – of such a beauty that when men enter they will say, "Ah, this is it!" and they will experience physically and concretely the significance of each garden. In the Garden of Youth they will know Youth. In the Garden of Bliss they will know Bliss. "Then She raised Her hand, and she said, "One must know how to move from Consciousness to Consciousness."

Hemant: I very much like Roger's statement that the gardens will grow "according to their (the Aurovilians') state of consciousness". I think that was the main theme we took for the whole process. It was also a reaction to what happened before when a small group worked very concentratedly on the gardens' design and it resulted in a conflict. We found Roger's statement that the evolution of the gardens should take place through a collective process a much better way of approaching it.

Aurosylle: However, I see that the result of this process is not quite as good as I had hoped for. It's fine to try to make everybody in the community happy, but everybody has an opinion and something gets lost... The most popular is not always the most beautiful.

Hemant: For the moment I think it's okay to sacrifice something to achieve collective unity and to help complete the Matrimandir gardens (which we were told was our most important task when we and five others were appointed as executives of Matrimandir). Of course, in the end the whole process should become more intuitive.

From an interview by Alan



Artist's impression of the Garden of Light



Artist's impression of the Garden of Power



Artist's impression of the Garden of Wealth

The Crown Controversy

Since our last issue, which focussed upon the controversy over the manifestation of the Crown, there have been significant developments and activities regarding this topic.

Two General Meetings were held in the community. At the first meeting (10th September), Auroville's Town Development Council (TDC) presented its plans for the Crown, which included the proposed width of the Right of Way allowing for buildings on either side of the road, and the results of their recent survey of the land over the proposed route of the Crown. There was some contention at the meeting's beginning, with one Aurovilian demanding that questions about the TDC's legitimacy be addressed. Once a couple of Working Committee members reassured the meeting that these issues would be addressed, the presentations began. While a question/answer section had been announced in the agenda, time was running short at the meeting's end, so the TDC only took questions from the community, and agreed to provide answers in another, as-yet-unannounced, forum.

The second general meeting (17th September) was called by some residents and planners. In this meeting, a more detailed presentation about the Crown area was given by Prashant, who formerly worked in the TDC. Architect Suhasini outlined the norms of urban planning processes, pointing out that the present process was contravening it by progressing from the initial conceptual plan directly to manifestation on the ground, bypassing some essential planning steps. She also highlighted some of the bureaucratic-legal discrepancies surrounding the appointment of the TDC members. This was followed by a question and answer session.

In recent days, the Secretary has continued to meet with groups of Aurovilians. She has invited some of Auroville's architects to come together for a 'dreamweaving' process on the Crown, to see what can be manifested from community expertise. In the meantime, the TDC has continued its activities. Clearing of vegetation and cutting of trees by TDC has been going on in some areas, sometimes close to residents' homes. There have been various requests to the TDC to halt this work until community agreement has been reached - the status quo was unclear at the time of going to press.

A group of 100+ concerned residents has also sent a letter to the TDC and other working groups that lists a number of outstanding questions and concerns about the TDC, "around issues of framework, professionalism, values and ethics". The document cites concerns about: "a serious lack of regard, accountability or transparency"; the sidelining of significant professional contributions; a lack of information sharing; the continued clearing of forest without informing the community; and that the TDC's actions have not been in alignment with Auroville's basic human values and ethics.

In this issue, we present five articles concerning the manifestation of the Crown. Two articles pose the same questions about planning the Crown to two different 'players': the TDC, which gave its answers in writing (elsewhere on this page); and Prashant, an Aurovilian landscape architect and urban-planner, whose interview is presented on page four. This page has two reflection pieces; and on page five we publish an interview with Elvira, a change management consultant who discusses the challenges of collective processes in Auroville and how these have been playing out in relation to the Crown issue in recent weeks.

Events are continuing to unfold daily. We will keep our readers updated in subsequent issues.

Editors

The Town Development Council on the Crown, mobility, and participative planning

Auroville Today: What is the conception of the Crown? Is it simply a communication channel between the four zones, or something more?

It is more. It is envisaged as the spine of the city comprising important buildings catering to the four zones, as a place of contact, connection and get together for the residents and guests, and as a channel for efficient infrastructure and mobility.

Should the Crown/overall plans take account of ground realities, like existing natural features and habitations, people's homes, villages etc.? If so, how?

Yes, with surveys, mapping and consultation with local residents of the community and stewards of the lands.

What is the urgency to manifest the Crown now, before there is a proper mobility plan, before all the land is bought, and before the whole community is in agreement about the process?

Fifty three years have passed by without much progress in the physical manifestation of the city. The Auroville Master Plan was gazetted in 2010 and numerous studies have been conducted regarding the same. The Crown being a fundamental component of the Galaxy, without manifesting the Crown the city cannot be manifested. The physical manifestation of the city is imperative to protect Auroville from outside suburban sprawl and the threat to our natural resources.

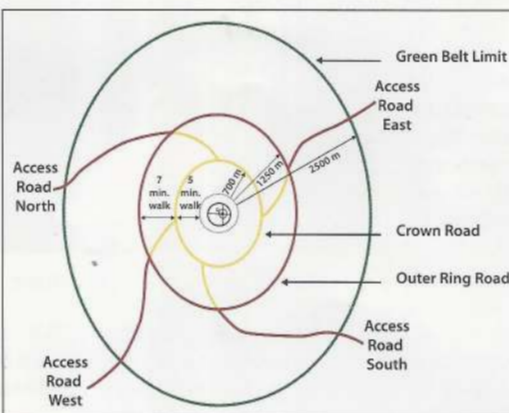
How do you envisage mobility inside the city in view of the increasing number of Auroville residents, 7000 Auroville employees, Auroville guests, construction traffic and visitors to Auroville units and individuals, including courier services?

Reducing individual transport and encouraging shared transport within the city is one of the key features of the mobility proposal. Embracing collectivism, a shift in mindset and behavioural change towards mobility within the community and its surroundings are needed to make Auroville a livable city. The city is envisaged as pedestrian and bicycle friendly, with shared non-polluting public transport, scheduled service vehicles and emergency vehicles to maintain the overall sanctity of the environment.

How do you envisage the mobility to reach Auroville, in view of the above (village workers, guests) and the increasing number of people who visit Auroville as day-tourists?

A mobility plan which includes policies, logistics and temporary arrangements is currently under development, in line with the broader mobility proposal of a car-free city. There are numerous mobility plans that have been worked on in the past by experts. The proposed plan shall also incorporate the relevant outcomes and details from those. The mobility plan shall take into consideration all types of present and possible future users that will commute within and outside of Auroville.

How is the outer ring road planned? Will all traffic be permitted to travel on it – if it's open to anyone, won't it turn into another highway and bring highway problems (noise pollution, environmental pollution, build-up on road, etc.) and badly impact two villages which it would pass through, as well as the greenbelt, which it would separate from the city?



The Outer Ring Road (red circle) with four access roads is planned between the City area and the Greenbelt. The Crown Road and its four access radials are marked in yellow. The green line marks the Green Belt limit.

For the very reason that the outer ring road passes through adjoining villages, it is important that it remains public and accessible to all. This road will receive traffic from the access roads that would connect the

Pondicherry-Tindivanam Highway and the East Coast Road. The main purpose of this road in the context of Auroville is (1) to connect the four zones on the peripheral side of the city (2) to divert the non-Auroville bound traffic from entering the city.

Are you in favour of participatory planning for the city area? If so, what, practically, do you understand by participatory planning? There have been other studies done – those by Doshi, Suhasini, David, Prashant, etc. – which include the social, environmental, economic, political, regional aspects which are supposed to be incorporated into the town planning. Are you going to incorporate these?

Yes. We are conducting design workshops with the community, we are in the process of reviving the dream weaving process with the architects of Auroville, and simultaneously we are in communication with Mr. Doshi. We acknowledge that numerous studies have been made both by Aurovilians and outside experts, and synthesising them to the current context and ensuring those that are relevant, especially those that fit within the overall vision of the Galaxy, Auroville Charter and the Gazetted Master Plan, is the need of the hour.

What competence do you think is required to plan Auroville? Does Auroville possess people with such competence? If so, how can they be utilised effectively?

Understanding of the Mother's vision of Auroville, understanding of the Charter, competence in urban planning and design, architecture, knowledge of our community's complex history and diversity, fundraising to build the city, buy the lands, skills in communication and community process, are some of the main competencies required to plan Auroville. Auroville does have the required competency and, wherever required, the skill set and consultation could be sought from outside. The experience, knowledge and goodwill of the community can be tapped through workshops and consultations, in the belief that we as residents are stewards of this project and are here to manifest Auroville, the city of the future. These also require enormous behavioural changes from all of us.

The Town Development Council

REFLECTIONS

Create space for the 47,000

If Auroville was prepared with a physical material base, thousands of sincere capable young people would come to serve and give the whole of themselves here. Auroville needs people who are willing to work selflessly and intensely with a spirit of service. We need to prepare ourselves to receive the future.

Remember, we do not become Aurovilians through the entry process. We become Aurovilians by becoming "willing servitors of the Divine Consciousness." And from this, we see many people around the world who are developing into "Aurovilians" and many of us, even as we are physically in Auroville, are yet to truly become the willing servitors of the Divine Consciousness.

But we think only we who are here in Auroville at present is all that there is to Auroville. Auroville is a future being born. And that future needs a physical base. And for that physical base to be established, our current physical base needs to shift a bit, be tweaked a bit, requires us to let go of what has been done so far and our attachment to it. It requires us to welcome the town.

The town that has space for the forest, but does not ask us to go back to being the forest dwellers. It has a space for everything – including the city – not the ugly "smart cities", but a new beautiful city of dawn with all of modern technology and yet a great harmony with nature. In our dear Auroville – the spiritual and material research lab – if we will not dare to take up this challenge, then who will?

There is cutting edge material research that Auroville can draw from. For example, American-Israeli multidisciplinary designer Neri Oxman makes sustainable skyscrapers using plant-based materials. We should be undertaking such interesting and exciting projects, rather than being stuck in the old tension between concrete jungle and a forest hut.

And last but not the least, in the dance of "numbers" and "consensus", we must have the conscience to exclude ourselves if our personal selfish interest lies on one side or the other. What I mean is – if my "property" lies on the Crown, then, of course, our ego's viewpoint will be to not let it go. For then not only are we being unjust to the 47000 who are not present here, but also to the 3000 who are present here.

I hope we create space for the rights of the 47000 who have yet not been invited to Auroville.

Divyanshi

Originally published in a slightly different form on Auronet.

Another fine mess? Or a wonderful opportunity?

When things get hot, it's easy to get caught up in the frame of the moment and lose a sense of the larger picture.

Take the present Crown imbroglio, which is generating so much heat and dust. If we can step back for a moment from our opinions and emotions and trace the larger contours of what is happening, the new Secretary can be seen to be a catalyst, an energizer of new movement within the community. And, in the process, many issues which before were neglected, half-hidden or unspoken, have suddenly been flung on to a wider screen for all to see.

Beyond the obvious one of the relationship of city development to the environment, these issues include interpreting Mother's intentions regarding the Galaxy; the 'truths' of the past versus present or evolving realities; the role of sacred symbolism in the design of the town; the nature of town planning and the requisite expertise; our attitudes towards the aspirations and needs of the youth; proprietorial attitudes; the cultural influences that may determine how we relate to authority; and the role of the Foundation authorities in our decision-making.

Above all, it raises the question of how, in such a diverse community, we can come together and work things out.

The question is, what do we do with these issues? Do we allow them to drive us further apart? Do we try to bury our differences again, which may potentially make them even more powerful because they will continue to drive us as subterranean influences?

Or do we take this as a wonderful opportunity for a better understanding of ourselves, of each other, and of these issues – for a great deal of information about the Galaxy and town planning, in particular, has been disseminated in the past weeks, and new sections of the community, like the

youth, energized – as the basis for moving forward together?

One key seems to lie in how we hold these issues. If we are attached to our positions, if we cling to them as if our very identity is at stake, if our only object is to assert the 'truth' of our position and the falsehood of all others, then we are the ideal receptor sites for the virus of disharmony which is always swirling around this project, seeking an opening.

But if we can set aside our predispositions and loyalties, and dispassionately examine everything that has been thrown up on the big screen in front of us, there's a chance we will understand each other better, and, through grasping the bigger picture, be able to tease out the unifying thread presently concealed in the murk of our conflicting opinions.

In fact, there are already signs that the hard lines are softening as new understandings and perspectives develop. But there is still a long way to go before the ideological barricades, erected over many years, are dismantled.

Auroville doesn't have to be a battleground where one opinion continually seeks to displace another. It could be a place where we understand and respect that each one of us possesses some fragment of a larger truth that can only fully manifest when we work together. And manifesting the Galaxy is a wonderful opportunity for doing this, for it is a potent symbol of a place where, as the architect Balkrishna Doshi put it, "everything can be absorbed, everything can manifest, and everything adds its own value and ability to regenerate, revitalize".

Once again, through the medium of the Crown conundrum, we are being offered the chance to transform the 'Auroville process', which is often crude, messy, and involves a lot of collateral damage, into one which emphasizes our common humanity and aspirations. Are we ready, at long last, to do this?

Alan

Designing the city

Prashant Hedao is a landscape architect and environmental planner with a Masters in Landscape Architecture and a Ph.D in Geography. He is also a consultant with the WHO's GIS Centre for Health. Since coming to Auroville in 2003, he has been actively involved in Auroville township and bioregional planning, has been part of several technical teams, and was a member of the Auroville Town Development Council from 2007 – 2009.

Auroville Today: What is your conception of the Crown?

Prashant: For a circular city plan like ours, a road connecting the four zones is needed. I don't think many people have a problem with the Crown, it is how and when it is to be implemented that needs to be discussed. In a recent General Meeting, one of the Town Development Council (TDC) members admitted that the present Crown section from the Solar Kitchen to Arka was poorly planned because it has only increased high-speed traffic. He said they want to learn from this, and not repeat it. But then they tell us it has to be a perfect circular road of 6.7 metres width, which is almost double the width of the present road. So what have they learned from that mistake?

How would you design the Crown?

It needs to be done differently in different sections. The Solar Kitchen – Arka stretch has to be more pedestrianised, so it needs more plazas, and reduced vehicular traffic. If the present section from the Gaia junction to Matrimandir/Town Hall is closed to vehicular traffic, then automatically the traffic on this side of the town (which is largely residential) would be reduced and most traffic will be diverted to the other side.

The section from PTDC to Savitri Bhavan doesn't need a new road as we already have a road that serves that connection, but a cycle path would be a brilliant idea. When the population of the city grows beyond say 15,000 and we have more densification, we could think of the road there, but right now it's not necessary. If we make a road now from PTDC to Savitri Bhavan, that road will be largely used by village traffic, exploratory tourists, and will also attract other elements that indulge in alcohol picnics, and other such activities. Basically we will be opening up more Auroville lands for outsiders and the road won't really benefit us.

The way through Darkali forest is also not recommended at this time, not even a cycle path because of its proximity to Kottakarai village: Darkali already has issues with alcohol picnics, and other anti-social activities. In future when we have sorted out these issues and how we interface with villages, it could be a narrower road, with no buildings on either side, an experience of a low impact road through a forest. This is something which Roger himself agreed to, although he also said this would depend on how and when the International Zone develops.

A road through Bliss forest would split the forest. There are, of course, roads through national parks in other parts of the world, but they are tightly controlled with checkpoints and limits upon when traffic could use it. And, besides, a road through Bliss is not really needed because there is an existing road which goes around it. Only if you are stuck on symbolism you want it to go through there.

Are you referring to some people's belief that the Crown should be perfectly circular?

Yes. But there's nothing geometrical about the Galaxy. I have tried very hard but I could not find any geometrical pattern in it, such as the curves of the radial roads or the distance between them, and the zones are not the same size or shape. But this hasn't stopped the planners. The 1999 Master Plan has twelve curved radial roads to divide up the city. When I asked why they had done this, someone admitted it was based on Mother's symbol. But if a road is a symbol, it also has to be functional too: it should solve problems, not add to them. And it begs a question. If we are primarily going to be a cycling and pedestrian city, do we really need all these wide roads which are more inviting to fast motorized vehicular traffic?

If you define the Crown as a road with a wide right-of-way with buildings setbacks on either side, which is the present plan, you cut off the central part from the outer parts of the city. In other words, you are doing the opposite of defining the Galaxy because the Galaxy is an interconnected flow, while the roads (with their right of way and building setbacks) split it into pieces.

So what are the options for improving mobility in a city?

Generally, in a city public transport is a good solution, but you need sufficient numbers of people to make it viable. At present, we are not close to those numbers. The Visitors Centre pick up service is one of our solutions at present for residents who don't want to drive and are willing to wait, especially at night.

What about the thousands of others – workers, tourists, construction traffic, etc. – who also use our roads every day? What kind of mobility plan can handle them?

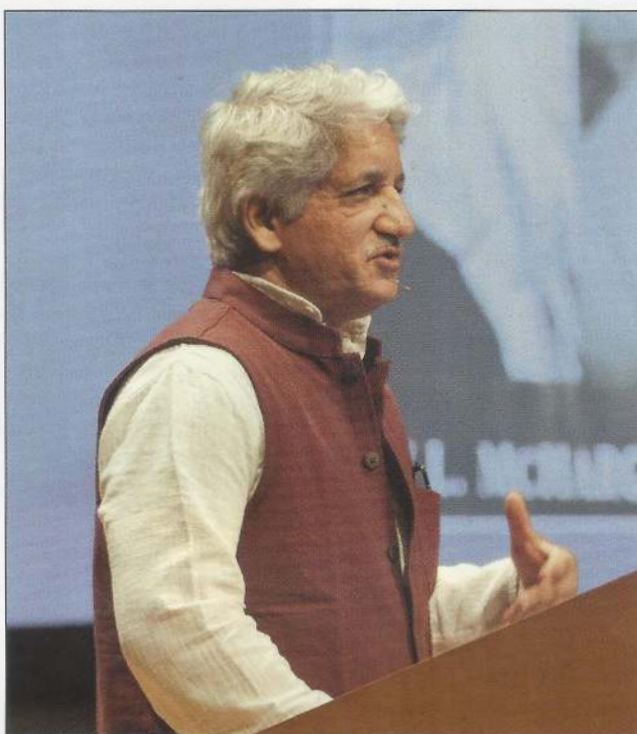
Mobility can be targeted in different ways. I think tourism is managed by the Visitors Centre quite well at present because tourists park their vehicles there, and then they walk or take the electric shuttle to go to Matrimandir viewpoint. What we can't control are individual tourists wanting to come inside Auroville on two wheelers, because you can't put barriers on every access. This is not a long-term solution.

Regarding workers, we need to know at which points they enter Auroville. Once we know this, we could plan a shuttle service at peak hours and this can probably take care of 50% to 60% of that traffic. But this is possible only if we have the numbers, and a place for them to safely park their private vehicles.

So what is the long-term mobility solution?

We will need to provide some access to Auroville from outside, but it should be done at the right time and in a phased manner. And we shouldn't be constructing all sections of the outer ring road.

I don't think the current conception of an outer ring road is a good idea because again you create a racetrack, and the four roads connecting with it would create an inviting bypass for heavy traffic to cross over between the Tindivanam and the ECR roads to avoid paying toll charges.



Prashant

The problem is the present TDC approach to planning which says, 'Let's build it as per the approved Master Plan of 1999 and then we'll figure out how to solve the problems it creates'. That's a very dangerous way to do planning.

The TDC is in a hurry to manifest the Crown now? Do you agree with this approach?

Not at all. This is not a city we should build in a hurry. If we really wanted to build it fast, we should bring in the Chinese. But, in the process, a lot of things would be left out which need to be considered.

Such as?

This brings us back to the basic question, what is a city? Some people think a city is just infrastructure and buildings. That is the physical part, but there are also the socio-economic, ecological aspects and the institutions which are created and, most importantly for us, the spiritual aspect. Everything we do here has a very strong spiritual connection to it, so how do we manage to keep that connection in an urban environment? How can such an environment support the spiritual aspirations of the individual and the collective?

All these things put together form a city. But if you only look at one aspect, you are missing out on a whole bunch of others.

So I think our city will happen, but not in the way that people in the current TDC and their supporters envisage it. And I'm not sure it will ever be completed.

The argument that we should build the city first and that will attract the people doesn't make sense, because how would you ensure that the right people are attracted here? Where we should be putting our energies is in supporting activities, building institutions, which would attract the right kind of people to come here.

Do you feel city planning should be participative, involving the larger community?

Yes, but this has been sacrificed at present. Currently, the Secretary has given the TDC more power than they could ever have dreamt of, and they were co-opted by certain interests who are not interested in participatory planning, so it's not surprising. But I think this is a passing phase from which we will learn a lot.

Actually, participatory planning is a challenge for everybody in the world. The way planning happened in the world in the 1960s was a master plan was made and that was built; there was no wider participation because it was believed that it was a job for experts. But the outcome was not good: we had cities with monumental buildings but they were not the most livable cities. Around the 1980s, as we got more knowledge about the environment, communities, and social interactions, it was realised that the planners need feedback from ordinary people.

But still it was only feedback; ordinary people were not involved in the actual planning. However, today it is felt the people have to be around the planning table as equal partners. But how do you manage this? So planners are organizing workshops and artists, poets, eminent personalities, are getting involved to make people aware of different aspects of the city, and the emphasis is upon transparent communication.

What needs to happen in Auroville to make participatory planning more effective?

Firstly, we have to identify people whose voices we don't hear at present. Not everybody is comfortable in speaking in a General Meeting or in a public forum. We have to explore other ways for

the not so visible section amongst us to contribute their views. There would definitely be issues they would bring in that the planners have not thought about and which need to be integrated. Traditional knowledge is also very important in planning, and we haven't really tapped into this. In the end, everybody potentially has a role to play in planning this city. It's hard work and time consuming providing the right platform, finding the right information and jointly coming up with solutions, but it needs to be done to make this an inclusive, sustainable city.

But some people argue that Mother has already given the guidelines – she is the client, not us – and all we need to do is manifest them.

Yes, I've come across this version, but in what sense can this ever be participatory? As I told one of the proponents, if you hold this view, you don't even need planners. All you need is contractors to manifest what you think is the plan.

But do we have the competence in Auroville to do integral participatory planning in the way you are suggesting?

I think we have some competence, but not one hundred percent. I don't know that we have the capability to make a detailed development plan (DDP), probably we do. One thing to remember is that you don't do a DDP for the whole city in one go. You do it for areas that you want to develop at that time, and you arrive at it after extensive consultations. We could get some help from outside; we have a lot of goodwill outside from the architecture community in India and many of them have expressed their interest to help. But whoever helps us will have to actively collaborate and interact with Aurovilians, because there's something special about Auroville that needs to be conveyed and integrated in such a plan.

What about people like you and others who have a lot of planning experience. Do you feel that your input is being incorporated in Auroville planning at present?

No, it is not.

Why not?

Because the present TDC is talking about a symbolism in planning the city, based on a certain geometry like a perfect circle, which they will build first. And only then figure out how to solve problems like getting people to confine themselves to travelling a maximum of 15 kilometres an hour on the Crown, or ensuring there is sufficient water.

We want to look at these things along with manifesting the Galaxy, not later, which is why we are treated as outsiders.

How could people like you be meaningfully involved?

Only if there is a shift in the balance between the symbolism and taking into account the ground realities and the real problems of mobility, water, regional connectivity, ecology, environment, etc.

There are competent people who are sidelined right now because in the planning group the balance is very heavily on the side of symbolism.

But I also see positives in the present Crown controversy. It has shaken up the community and reconnected many people through their concerns. And because the Youth Centre is in the middle of this, the youth have become very active. We made a presentation to them on planning and they were enthusiastic: some of them even expressed that they want to become planners. Some schoolchildren are also getting involved. Our effort is that they become informed citizens and don't make decisions based solely on perceptions.

All this is very positive. In future, it will make it more difficult to impose a simplistic planning solution because now the community is much more active and knowledgeable.

Do you feel that people like yourself bear some responsibility for the present rush to complete the Crown, because there seems to be a fear in one section of the community that you are anti-Galaxy, and if they don't do something now, it will never happen.

Partly I agree, although I didn't take these labels very seriously, despite hearing some people refer to people like us as the 'anti-Galaxy gang'. It's wrong because the anti-Galaxy bit is a narrative propagated by the people who have no clue about how to manifest it. We have tried to make it very clear that we are not against the Crown or the Galaxy. We are just trying to marry them in a logical way and make the whole concept more beautiful and functional at the same time.

And we're not alone in wanting to do this. One eminent Indian architect said the Galaxy is a beautiful concept, and we should not do anything that takes away the beauty of it. He felt you should not perceive the Galaxy only from above, from a bird's eye view, but that the beauty, the dynamism, should also be experienced every time you move through different parts of the city.

The great Indian architect, Balakrishna Doshi, is also fascinated by the Galaxy and by Auroville because of the possibility for experimentation here: nowhere else in India can you get this. He actually said that building Auroville is an ongoing experiment.

He also said we must not forget the regional connection with Auroville, and the particular challenge of how we interface the villages with Auroville. At the moment, one of the proposed lines of force ends eighteen stories high next to Edayanchavady village! This is why he remarked that Auroville cannot develop unless you also develop the villages.

From an interview by Alan and Lesley

Supporting collective processes in a diverse community

Elvira grew up between two worlds: the pristine lakes and snowy alps of Germany, and the red soil and Palmyra trees of Auroville. As a teenager, she became interested in leadership and the transformation of conflict into positive change. She now works with groups in Auroville and around the world as a mediator, trainer and change management consultant in the field of conflict management and organisational development, with the aim of creating spaces for collective learning.

Auroville Today: What makes you passionate about your work?

Elvira: From my teenage years on, certain topics kept coming to me: leadership, conflict resolution, and our inner resources – how we turn things into fuel. I came to Auroville at 20, and the work found me. When I was about 30, someone interviewed me for a documentary. I was still searching for a professional purpose, and saying I felt half-baked and I hadn't arrived yet. And the interviewer switched off the camera, and she said, 'I know the thing for you,' and told me about a four-month course in International Conflict Transformation in Germany. And I looked it up and went 'That's it!' I was a single mum with a four-year-old and it was quite expensive, yet, suddenly, everything fell into place in two weeks. And when I did that course, I really 'arrived'. All the threads of my life, my passions, suddenly made sense and were a pattern.

What are the skills you bring to the process as a facilitator?

Well, the first is really listening: listening to understand where people are coming from, what is driving comments and what is the need; and listening to find common ground. I also synthesise, and provide structure to support people to ask good questions and to use the tools of language to be precise and discerning. We tend to jump to solutions, without having gone through questions, such as what is the root cause of the issue. If that process is done well, then a sustainable solution will emerge by itself. Maybe not everybody will be happy at the end, but enough people will take responsibility for the next step in a healthy way so that those who don't agree don't feel the need to block, because they respect that the process happened in a certain way.

What are the challenges of working in Auroville?

I see a larger culture of conflict avoidance, and also not being good at being in disagreement. We love to disagree, but without the refinement of a proper dialogue. We're always in a certain stage of conflict, of trying to prove the other wrong. There's a resistance to the naming of the negative aspects of the culture, and this is a huge block to working with it. If you look at social systems, there's a hierarchy of principles – like a check list for diagnosis. The first one is to acknowledge what is there and accept it. If you can't do that, you can't work systematically or understand what the main pain point is. That's one of my main challenges here. I have a feeling it comes, at least partly, from our spiritual aspirations, from aiming so high with the wonderful tool of Integral Yoga. People often say 'We don't need this kind of work. We have the yoga.' So there's this idea that if we do our inner work enough, then everything else will work out. For that to work, in my view, we'd all have to withdraw from each other for 10-12 years, and then we could get back together and try to do governance and see if there's a great change. But we're not there, and we haven't found a way to do Integral Yoga collectively, so it needs this hybrid model approach. However, there's a big resistance to that.

Given that your work focuses on collective processes, that focus on the inner must be challenging?

Yes. The other challenge is diversity – the way we engage with each other is so different in each culture. In meetings, there can be thirty people with ten or fifteen very different cultural imprints. As a facilitator, what do you do? You always lose somebody, no matter what you do. And if you try to do a collective process that serves everybody, it's

not efficient. So, at the core of it, we've not done enough diversity work. We've adopted the phrase 'unity in diversity', but we trust too much in some miracle that will happen just because we are in Auroville.

What are the satisfactions?

We have seen the beginning of a culture shift in the last 10-12 years in the conflict work that the Koodam, Restorative Auroville and other initiatives have been doing. Many people can encounter conflict differently in their lives now, and look for restorative processes. So it has been a hugely satisfying and gratifying journey to be part of that shift, and to see a willingness to play and break patterns. It has been satisfying to train mediators and facilitators, and to work with the arbitrators. However, at the same time we now see a general pattern that when there's conflict, people again revert to demanding justice, power, authority, and punitive measures. The question now is: how can Auroville cater to the need, yet stay true to our values and continue the cultural shift?

What are your thoughts on what's currently happening with the planning process for the Crown?

The Crown for me is just a symptom that indicates that we have not learned to use our diversities as a resource, and haven't learned how to listen to each other and not 'otherise' each other. Agency has come from outside – a Secretary with a strong drive – and that triggered a response in our system around a topic, and it could have been any topic. And what we see is that we cannot listen to each other. If someone has a different opinion, they get labelled and put in a box. I haven't ever before seen this level of disconnect or cracks in the social fabric of the community. There's a feeling of 'fronts' and winners and losers, which is deeply unhealthy. How do we involve people in making decisions and building the environments they want to live in? What do we want to achieve by what we would call

"The key lies not in whether we are proficient at putting out fires, nor in whether we are adept at articulating our hopes. The key lies in whether we are capable of linking the potential in the crisis with the changes needed to move us toward the dream".

John Paul Lederach

a participatory process? I suggest we want to achieve community, connection and ownership. Participatory processes can hold the qualities of connection and can give people the opportunity of an 'and-also' approach, not the 'either-or' which is a 'winner-loser' approach, so that we can 'enlarge the cake' as we say in mediation. Collaboration can happen when we meet each other as equals. Participatory processes can be a real leap in what we need to learn anyway as a community: how to work together in different parameters, rather than hierarchical top-down structures and the idea that there is one 'true' way.

Are some groups taking that approach?

I see the whole discussion as very muddled as there are three ingredients posing road blocks to collaboration. Right now, there's a mindset dominating the main groups that thinks there's just one way of embodying the physical structure of the Galaxy plan on the ground and that we are in a rush. That mindset seems connected to a deep faith that we can make a spiritual leap if we build the

Galaxy this way – and because it's not happening, there is pain. Another ingredient is this group power structure, when people come into a role as a group member and want to become a saviour and 'fix the mess', but the idea of fixing things from the top-down doesn't work anywhere in the world anymore. And another ingredient has to do with comfort zones of the community – the 'let's not rock the boat' position, the idea that peo-



Elvira

ple want to stay out of the politics of the Town Hall. So there's no community to speak of. I think these are the three main ingredients acting as road blocks to collaboration and connection right now: deeply held beliefs and the pain around those; power; and non-engagement.

What about the TDC's mode of operating, given that it claims to have a certain kind of legitimacy, which some see as coming more from above, rather than from the community?

Some people have been arguing that it's illegitimate from a legal point of view, but to follow that track, then you need to take it to the legal world and get a decision from there. And I don't think that's the whole issue. We need to consider: why was the TDC structured like it is? It was structured like this to have some authority in relation to the outside world, not within Auroville. And so we come back to power dynamics and patterns again. It's like we forgot that the TDC as a statutory body was created as an armour towards the outside. But power does not discern, so it attracts people who use power in a certain way. And right now, they're using that power against the community, saying 'You stay out, we have this "responsibility"'. So we have to talk about power, organisational memory, why was this entity created, what was the purpose, how are we using it today, and do we want that?

Because, when people have extreme beliefs and have power, it's easier to push things through. If you have a deep belief that one thing is the truth, you're also attracted to power and vice versa. For me, the issue is not the TDC's legitimacy, but how they hold power, and their purpose. Purpose is a really important question in systemic work. What's the purpose of a team, the work, the survey? And we don't ask that at all. The TDC says their purpose is to build the Crown as fast as possible. And that's a questionable purpose in general – to build something as fast as possible, especially when it's a road.

You mentioned there's an element of the community having to take responsibility for their own role in the creation of the problems. What role has the weak state of the Residents Assembly (RA) played?

What's the chicken and what's the egg? The RA is not strong, but you have to ask the question, why and what can we do to strengthen it? The RA has been disempowered by people in power by not putting energy into it. If the same amount of effort is put into reviving the RA and revamping how we work together as is being put into building the Crown right now, we'd have an empowered RA in two months. We could focus on that. Another ingredient is the lack of direct engagement expressed by someone at last Friday's general meeting: 'I want you to do this, and to inform me.' If too many people in a community have that stance, what does that mean? We're 2500 people, and we're attempting something that would need to be run by 50,000, so can we afford to disengage?

Do you think this disengagement has created a certain environment for the Secretary to step into?

For me, she can be two things: she can be an incredible catalyst for everything that we've wanted to happen here. Or it can be really challenging. It's up to us how we 'meet' her, and who meets her. For me, it's the image of a chemical catalyst: we are the chemical environment she's coming into. It can either lead to a beautiful chemical reaction that overcomes an obstacle and leads to a transformation, or it can lead to an explosion. But that depends on the environment, not on her. It depends on us, and what formation we take with her amongst us.

Has the community's fairly ad hoc and improvised response to this issue had its drawbacks?

Yes, the ad hoc approach has few positives, except that people are engaged. People are now thinking how to make it less ad hoc. In organisational development, we talk a lot about agility or swarm intelligence, something that is not in boxes, but much more alive and organic, yet still synchronised and organised. For me, there are two dynamics going on in Auroville. One says, 'We need to press ahead and we need to build this one physical imprint and we have no time and there are threats and urgency.' And another dynamic says 'No, we need to work together, take our time to work together and not hurt each other in the process of reaching our goal.' We're all looking at the same goal of human unity and a step in spiritual evolution, but the two sides have different ways. Around the world, it's usually easier to speak in one voice on the one side that leans towards radical, black or white solutions. And the other side is just much more messy, because it's participatory and there are many different voices and bubbles, and the process is the aim and that's a more abstract goal. So this dynamic is at the centre of the ad hoc thing.

I'm trying to listen to the different bubbles in this participatory movement, and to initiate that we talk to each other so we know what each bubble is doing so we can create synergy. The architects, for example, are starting to work together. There are a lot of good conversations. But we're such a bunch of individualists, and there are too many leaders. And there's often no time for good process: a lot of people work elsewhere, are very busy and don't have a lot of spare time.

However, through letting myself be involved in this, there's a new community, new connections emerging around me. It's magic, beautiful – you have this feeling of being held, of belonging.

As told to Lesley

Couples in Corona time

As can be read in national and international news, the pandemic has put a strain on relationships worldwide, causing spikes in break-ups and divorces around the world. How is it going in Auroville? How are relationships affected here?

In Auroville, it seems that life goes on “business as usual”: there have been some break-ups, but also new couples have formed, and existing couples have decided to level up: moving in together, proposals, marriages, pregnancies, babies, etc.

However, no matter which new aspect of a relationship our friends have experienced over the past year and a half, adjustments had to be made to fit this unusual situation. We interviewed a number of couples to see how they have negotiated a relationship during the pandemic.

New couples

In this “category”, most of the interviewees knew each other for several years already, some even since childhood. Seeing as many events were not happening as usual, “normal” dating options (eating out, going to the movies, practicing sports together) were off the table. Instead, a lot of time was spent at home, which allowed these couples to get to know each other extremely fast. This affected their relationship rather positively, as they could spend a lot more time together and had the opportunity to get to know each other without having the added stress of school or work.

Nevertheless, this was also a little overwhelming at times, so they all had to make an effort to make personal time for themselves. Lili and Perceval decided to take it slow, “consciously giving each other the space to grow into the relationship, while maintaining our individualities and not being pulled away from ourselves and what is most important to the two of us respectively.”

Moving in together

For some couples, the decision to move in together was definitely prompted by the situation, for various reasons: lack of other housing options, moving or visiting each other would have become an ordeal during the lockdown periods, or they simply wanted to stay together during these times.

This allowed them to get to know each other very well quite rapidly, but it wasn't always easy. To have community interactions completely cut off and replaced by essentially one relationship was challenging, which turned into a crash course in how they react under tension. These issues were then promptly dealt with and they found common interests and activities, as well as “alone time”.



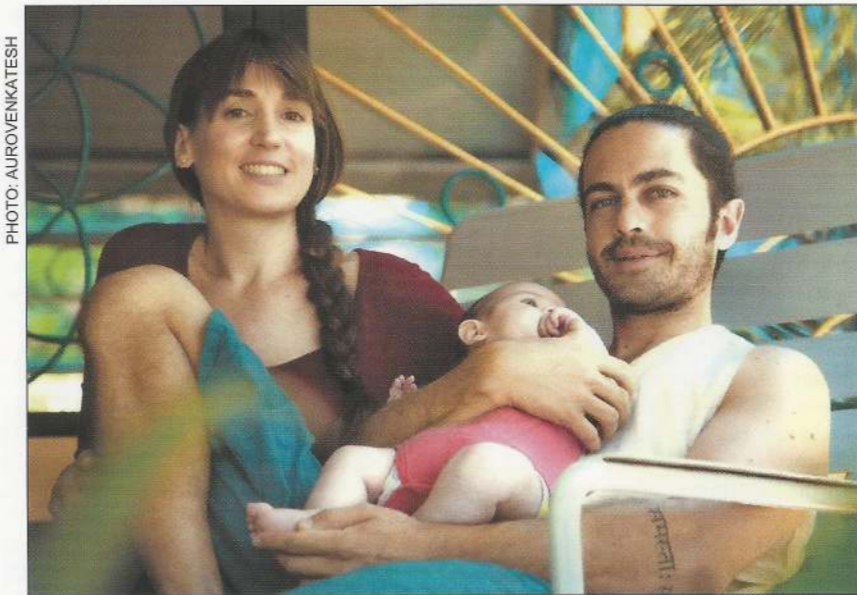
Shivangi and Ganesh at their wedding ceremony

Getting married

Most large-scale events such as marriages were put on hold or were subject to strict attendance regulations in India, but some of our friends decided to go ahead anyway like Aurore and Yann, who had been in a long-distance relationship since 2014, half-time in Auroville and Yann in Switzerland for the other six months. “With the pandemic unfolding, our clear choice was to stay in India from the start,” says Aurore, “so when the government issued a press release that all foreigners that wished to stay in the country could do so, Yann took the last-minute decision to not leave.” When the whole world came to a stop, they started talking about getting married, so that they would never again be faced with the fear of being separated on two continents not knowing when they would be able to see each other again for whatever reason. She adds, “Having decided to marry in the midst of this whole crazy lockdown time just made us grow stronger.” They started the process in July 2020 and got married in December, with only one day's notice from local officials to organise everything! The lockdown situation was thankfully a lot more relaxed at that moment, so they and their close ones enjoyed a beautiful traditional ceremony in a 3500-year-old Shiva temple in Kodur.

Shivangi and Ganesh's decision to get engaged and married was actually ‘pre-Corona’ as they explain: “We planned to take this step at this particular point, regardless of the lockdown as we felt like it was time for a deeper commitment.” Nevertheless, there was a succession of ever-harsher lockdown regulations leading up to their marriage, which impacted numerous aspects of marriage preparations: their guest list had to be restricted due to regulations, but also to protect their older relations and friends (an essential part of Indian rituals and gatherings); the travel risks were increased for their family; and it was

harder to book venues, purchase the necessary gifts and so on, and respect deadlines or timelines. “There was a shyness even to invite people, and then how to balance between having a great time yet follow social distancing, wearing masks, and sanitising,” explains Shivangi. “Planning an event like this, going out to visit places and meeting people made us worried about exposing others who were not even directly connected to our planning process.” They finally married in July 2021, also in a very old Shiva temple in Munnur.



Mathilde and Andrés and their baby

Getting a baby

Adding a little being to a couple dynamic is already quite a challenge; imagine doing so in the midst of these uncertain times! Many shops being closed, the new parents had to adapt their basic needs. However, most of them were extremely organised and procured as many things as they could in advance to avoid the hassle of shopping in lockdown. Several couples didn't want to visit shops in person for obvious health reasons, so they relied on e-shopping and Auroville-based help circles. Some were even lucky enough to have family abroad send care packages!

The easiest source was online, as Maya and Peter explain: “We have turned to e-shopping more during the pandemic. Looking at the coming months where we will need to purchase clothes, diapers and food items, we will shop online if the shops are still closed as it can be particularly useful.” However, even online shopping came to a halt for a while and it has its own set of limitations. Seulki and Jun took another approach: “When we lived in Korea, we shopped online a lot, but living here for two years, we are doing well without online shopping. Now we prefer to borrow things from our neighbours.”

Within Auroville itself, there are several units and services providing necessities: PTDC offers basic products such as body wash and oils; Maroma has a specific line of products for babies; and Eco-Femme provides reusable diapers. As many know, Auroville also boasts an extensive supportive network. “The main way we received equipment was through free store and donations from other mums. We just asked for or offered things and advice through our WhatsApp chat,” explain Mathilde and Andrés. Elene and Malcolm also tapped into this resource, adding: “For weeks following Ether's birth, we received lunch daily from community members through a group called ‘Made with Love’.” This was one of the many services given by the Morning Star team which accompanied us throughout the pregnancy.”

Lockdown consequences for new parents

Advantages and disadvantages linked to the virus often went hand in hand, like a double-edged sword.

Lockdown implied the closing down of many people's workplaces, so new parents suddenly had a lot of time to spend with their children, but couples who could not work remotely suffered from a sudden decrease in income. “We got our much-needed privacy after birth without having to explain why,” Elene and Malcolm recount. “It was good to have the baby when the whole world was on standby, therefore we could focus on our lives.” Mathilde and Andrés share the sentiment, but also suffered from having no work and having to rely on their families abroad. Andrés explains: “Countries with a stronger economy/state than Auroville could offer better economic support to those suffering from the economic crisis created by the pandemic.” For graphic designer Seulki, work didn't slow down because of Corona, but the lockdown did allow her to take some much deserved rest, seven months into her pregnancy.

Social distancing, travel restrictions and lockdown regulations obliged many to stay at home. “There was no outside pressure to do anything at any time, so we could just create our bubble, healthy and balanced,” explain Mathilde and Andrés. Many people enjoyed this breather that the entire world took, taking the time to centre and

concentrate on themselves. However, after a while, even that became hard as it gave way to a feeling of loneliness too, since all social activities were severely affected. New parents such as Mathilde and Andrés missed the possibility of activities like baby Watsu (water shiatsu for babies) or baby massage. For Elene and Malcolm, one frustration was that immediate family members were unable to meet their baby due to travel restrictions.

Midwifery in lockdown

Shanti from Morning Star, the midwife group which assists births, explained that new pregnancies or babies come in “waves”, depending on when couples are ready to take that step. However, all our lovely midwives agreed on the fact that COVID-19 did not have an impact on pregnancy rates. “Parents decide to have a child when they feel ready to take in a new little being into their family,” says midwife Hilde. “The social hype of wanting to predict more babies during lockdown is based on a lot of sensation, which sometimes put the parents in a position where they have to defend themselves by making it clear it was their wish to have the baby now, and not some silly expectation or media sensation.”

A clear disadvantage of the pandemic is that hospitals are more regulated, and put limits on the number of people who can accompany a mother-to-be. Also, the hospital staff are already quite stressed and this does nothing to calm the future mothers who are already dealing with a lot themselves.

However, many more mothers preferred to give birth at home, where the atmosphere is generally more peaceful and calm than in a hospital. There has been an increase in Indian families deciding to give birth at home rather than at the hospital, but this, once again, is not necessarily linked to corona.

Hilde notes other positive effects of the current scenario for new parents: “Since both parents were home and could spend a lot of time with their new-born baby, the father got more involved and took care of the mother in a way that is not always possible when they go to work. This was for most new parents an extra bonus!”

Auroville vs the “outside world”

All the interviewees, regardless of the category they fell under, felt that Auroville is definitely a privileged environment to be in when the rest of the world screeches to a halt. “For the last year and a half, I only hear about people's frustrations, their fears, and emotional violence from all around the world except here,” observed Yann. “While couples were struggling to stay together elsewhere, here we can thrive, we can learn to know each other more, and slowly move towards Auroville's ideals. It's once again the energy of this place, the space, the quiet life of nature around us that allows that.”

For new parents, pregnancy and child birth were definitely easier here when compared to most places in the world. “The holistic approach of Morning Star kept the process ‘humane’, unlike other countries where restrictions were so severe that pregnancy and giving birth could be nightmarish and solitary,” explains Andrés. Mathilde adds: “In France, women who had their baby had to wear a mask during labour and their partner was not allowed in, or if so, in very restricted conditions. During my pregnancy, several pregnancy-related activities were still happening with proper COVID measures, such as Watsu, dance class, birth preparation.”

For Seulki and Jun, being in Korea during this pandemic would have surely made them very stressed and depressed because of the impact it would have had on their lifestyle and the restrictions with regard to meeting family and close ones. Being in Auroville gave Seulki the freedom to live more slowly and build up the courage to get pregnant and raise a child, which she didn't feel confident about doing in Korea. The same goes for Shivangi and Ganesh who admitted that if they had not been in Auroville, they probably would not have become engaged and married at this point.

Many of the interviewees resonated with the feeling that the pandemic did not really impact us on a personal or familial level because we have a slower pace of

life here, as Shivangi and Ganesh explain: “Over here, we remember to touch base every now and then and check in with ourselves on where are we and what are we doing.” This is one of the reasons why the pandemic didn't really create many ripples. Some couples broke up, other people got together, marriages and babies happened notwithstanding but not because of the pandemic.

Yet some things changed. “All of our lives have been changed significantly due to the pandemic – particularly in our values of what is important, our careers, economic safety and priorities,” explain Maya and Peter. “These times are truly dynamic: we are both experiencing existential paradigm shifts, as well as a significant amount of personal growth,” add Lili and Percy, which many people resonate with fully.

Divya Lieser



Malcolm, Elene and their baby

Serving Auroville

Tatiana Sineeva joined Auroville in 2014. Here she talks about her background, her work teaching Hatha Yoga, her discovery of Auroville, her educational experience at Deepanam school and her work as a member of Auroville's Residents' Assembly Service.

Chelyabinsk is an industrial Russian city east of the Ural Mountains, on the border of Europe and Asia. On February 15, 2013, it gained notoriety because an asteroid the size of a six-story building exploded over the city. The blast of the Chelyabinsk meteor, many times stronger than the blast from the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, triggered a shock wave that injured more than a thousand people and damaged over 7,000 buildings. It is from here that Tatiana Sineeva and her husband Aleksandr came to Auroville.

"I was teaching a class of linguistics at the Chelyabinsk university when the blast happened," remembers Tatiana. "We saw a blinding white light and heard a deafening sound, which was followed by a shockwave that shattered the double glass windows of the auditorium. We all ran outside and saw an incredible blue sky crossed by a long trail of billowing white smoke. The city was in chaos with extensive damage all around. But nobody knew what had happened. It was only much later that we were informed that a meteor had exploded over our city."

"I was working as an associate professor in linguistics at the Chelyabinsk State University. I have a Ph. D. in linguistics and Romance languages, with specialization in French and in Public Relations. I had an interest in French from an early age, possibly because my grandmother inspired me to learn it, as French was the Russian court language at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. But my mother was not really happy with my choice. She wanted me to study English, a language I only seriously took up when I arrived in Auroville. And perhaps my choice has also to do with the fact that I never had a strong inner connection to Russia. From a very young age I had the feeling that I did not belong there, which was confirmed by my friends who told me that I am 'not really Russian'."

Hatha yoga

"But the reason I came to Auroville has nothing to do with my profession. When I was 28, I developed some health conditions. My doctor advised me to do some physical activity. I started swimming, but got bored. Then I found myself in a yoga class at the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple in Chelyabinsk. It was as if a part of me suddenly woke up. I started practicing and to everyone's surprise progressed very fast. In a short while I was able to do the most complicated asanas without a problem."

"My progress was noted and very soon my yoga teacher asked me to take over her class as she wanted to leave Russia for some years. But I wasn't planning to become a Hatha Yoga teacher. In fact, the idea scared me. I excused myself as I had commitments at the university. But she insisted, and



Tatiana

didn't plan, we just travelled around and so arrived at Rishikesh, where we discovered a yoga meditation course of the International Vishwaguru Yoga and Meditation Institute.

"That experience asked for more. We returned every subsequent year to explore different parts of India. Upon arrival in New Delhi, we would randomly decide where to go, without any particular planning. In that way we went to Bangalore in 2012, and then decided to come to Pondicherry. My husband had heard something about this place from a friend of a friend, but I knew nothing about it, and neither about Auroville. But when we arrived, we felt something which I still can't describe. It was like 'Oooh! This is paradise! This is mind blowing!' We moved from Pondicherry to Auroville, got a room in Centre Guest House and then roamed around. And we booked a concentration in the Matrimandir on the last day of our visit. That gave me an indescribable experience. Something was trying to come out, and I was crying, crying and crying under the Banyan tree, so long that I was gently asked to leave the place. I was totally lost in my emotions."

"Back in Russia, I met again my yoga group, but I was still in the wave of that experience at the Matrimandir. For one hour I talked about the beauty of Auroville, that heaven on earth, and while talking I noticed that one person was strongly staring at me. After the class I asked her what was up? She said, 'How come you went to Auroville without informing us?' I answered that it had been a random choice. Then she explained that a friend of hers is living in Auroville, that she herself had visited Auroville, and that, had she known about our visit, she would have given us gifts to carry. I was flabbergasted. Chelyabinsk is not a small city, but you would not expect anyone living there to have heard about Auroville, leave alone having a friend there."

"That friend turned out to be Saraswati, the ceramic artist. So the next year, in 2013, we arrived back in Auroville, packed with gifts for Saraswati. We met amazing people and had many conversations about their experience with Auroville. And shortly after we returned to Russia, we took the decision to go and live in Auroville. I came in September 2014; for financial reasons my husband joined one, and a half years later."

Teaching in Auroville

"My first works were teaching ceramics at Deepanam school and assisting the 5th grade class teacher at Udavi school. I learned the principles of integral education, which were new to me even though there are quite a few commonalities with the education system I was used to. Since 2015 I have been working as a teacher of French, painting and yoga at Deepanam, an experience I really enjoy. I'm thrilled to be a part of this lovely family and it is pure bliss to have an opportunity to explore concepts of 'the youth that never ages' and 'free progress', which supports children's natural development, and imparts the joy of learning with independence and responsibility in a team of passionate teachers."

"And, of course, I started teaching Hatha Yoga as well. A class for adults spontaneously formed at Deepanam school, which is still very active. It was a bit difficult in the beginning as I had to teach all the proper sequences in English, but that has almost been mastered."

"I am often asked if my Hatha Yoga is different from the traditional Indian schools of yoga, such as Iyengar or Ashtanga. I respond that I don't like labels and that there is no major difference in content, only in approach. My 'style', if you want to call it so, is a very relaxed kind of fusion of different styles. Whatever comes, I try to integrate. I do not have levels, I accept everyone. If people complain that they are not able to do a particular posture, I tell them not to take it too seriously, not to try to be flawless, to take it easy and to enjoy the process."

The Residents' Assembly Service

"Slava was my neighbour in Auroville. He learned that I had been teaching Public Relations and Communication in an international and multicultural context and asked me if I would join the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) as a volunteer. There was some survey going on and he thought it would be interesting if I could get involved. That led me to becoming a member of the RAS in January 2016."

"I remember, I was so surprised when I came to know that the quorum for decision making is only 10% of the adult population of Auroville. At the time, 10% was only about 180 people. I felt it was strange that such a small group could take binding decisions for all. But over the years, I have seen the reason for this low percentage: community participation in decision making is very low, except for emergencies."

"The Residents' Assembly Service had been set up to assist the Residents' Assembly – all the Aurovilians aged 18 and above – to take decisions and be responsible for the voting process if consensus cannot be reached. But this mandate soon became too narrow and we felt the need for it to be widened."

"One of our biggest jobs was organizing the selection of the members of four major working groups, which happened in January this year. Our team did what was almost impossible: arranging the event with more than 400 residents involved and connecting three venues virtually, as large gatherings were banned because of Covid-19. As the RAS consisted of only three members working half-time, a small group of dedicated resource persons and facilitators came to help. There was also support from volunteers, the Covid Task Force members and the Auroville Council. But notwithstanding all our care, an incident happened: some ballot boxes were tampered with. We had to redo that particular selection. Nevertheless, many people felt we had done a stellar job; but some still criticized us."

"That experience left a bad taste; it strengthened our feeling that we couldn't continue as before and we made the resolution to suspend decision-making processes till a new policy had been agreed upon."

"This, in effect, motivated the Auroville Council to take up the issue, create a sub-group to review the Residents' Assembly Decision-making Policy and call for inputs from the wider community. We thought it wouldn't take long to come to a revised interim document, but then Covid-19 intensified and more lockdowns happened, which brought things to a standstill. During the lockdown, I have been working as a driver of a C-19 ambulance van."

"The sub-group is now completing the integration of the feedback it has received, and we expect that an interim policy will soon be announced. We hope that the final policy will manifest in the near future, as we need to develop new ways to arrive at decisions; for we all understand that voting doesn't correspond to Auroville's ideals. The matter is urgent: decisions of the Residents' Assembly need a strong foundation, in particular at the present time when there is so much polarization in the community."

"Working in the RAS showed me how important it is that members of working groups work as a team. We did a series of 'RAS-envisioning' team-building workshops, where we learned how to respect each other and find common solutions, even if the views held in the beginning were widely apart. I believe it would be great if this kind of workshop could become mandatory for the working groups, not only to learn about each other and how to work together, but also to know what work the previous team has done, as the existing system of staggering memberships of working groups easily leads to a loss of a group's institutional memory."

It would be equally important to set up a system of civic education for all, to gain a basic understanding of Indian culture, of the laws of India, of the ideals of Auroville, of the structure of the Auroville Foundation and of the organizational framework of Auroville. It is only in this way that we can hope to truly serve Auroville."

In conversation with Carel



A motor bike can support an advanced hatha yoga posture

before long I found myself in front of a class of more than 50 people. Over the years, that number increased to more than a hundred. My husband too was there, progressing steadily in his own hatha yoga journey, while being fully supportive of my development."

"My teacher left Russia with the satisfaction that she had secured a good successor. 'You are settled here,' she said to me. 'You are married, you have a good job at the university, and you will not leave.' But there she was wrong. I stayed only for five years more."

Discovering India

"For I soon realized that I was lacking skills to teach hatha yoga. We decided to visit India, the home of hatha yoga, and go on an adventure trip. We

Economic relief

The Budget Coordination Group (BCC) has announced that self-supporting units, services and guesthouses can apply for economic relief grants to cover their fixed costs such as salaries, rent, electricity, internet and accounting charges. This is the second time that the BCC is allocating funds in support of Auroville units which have been impacted by the economic crisis brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The BCC also allocates temporary emergency maintenances to those units and services whose economic situation makes it challenging to continue to provide Aurovillian maintenances.

The funds for providing economic relief have all been donated to Auroville.

Inform about absence

The Working Committee has stated that all residents and volunteers who will be out of Auroville for more than 2 months, even if traveling to other parts of India, need to inform the Residents' Service so that current information about who is in and out of Auroville is always available. This was a big challenge during the first lockdown of the pandemic, when updated lists of those present in Auroville were needed.

Aadhar card required

The Working Committee informed all residents of Auroville that everyone, irrespective of nationality, is required to have an Aadhar Card and that henceforth, the Office of the Secretary will not process any requests from residents, newcomers, friends of Auroville and spouses of residents for validation of residence or visa recommendations without the reference of an Aadhar Card.

Auronet postings - keep it civil

The Auroville Council has informed the community that it is removing postings on Auronet – Auroville's internal internet site – that contain disrespectful or insulting language to defame individuals or groups. The Council emphasised that in a culturally diverse community, a difference of opinion should not be a reason to accost each other and that any serious allegations need to be submitted to the appropriate working groups.

Auroville Art Library

Kirtan and AV Art Service have started a website with an inventory of the artworks of Auroville artists that fellow Aurovilians can temporarily borrow, to enjoy their beauty, and decorate their homes, offices, and activities.

Ecological restoration of worked out mines

Auroville Botanical Gardens has released a video on the ecological restoration of the depleted limestone mines of Ramco Cements in Pandalgudi, India. The ongoing collaboration with Ramco, which started in October 2019, has now resulted in the restoration of 200 acres by planting over 300,000 trees and shrubs from more than 80 species. While the ultimate aim is to restore 800 acres, over the next 12 months this flagship project will take on another 100 acres. To watch the video visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml84gB3do_4

Auroville's innovations for better breathing

During the first Covid wave, a few Auroville units quickly innovated in response to the needs of the region, taking up large-scale mask production and inventing ventilators. We covered these initiatives in the August 2020 edition [No. 373] of *Auroville Today*. One year later, we look at how these initiatives are faring.

The word 'pivot' became the marketing buzz word of 2020 in many parts of the world. It captured the agility of businesses that could quickly change direction and move towards practical solutions to address the Covid pandemic. In early 2020, the word sounded fresh and of-the-moment, and it was voted the marketing word of 2020 by America's Association of National Advertisers. It held the promise of innovative solutions, thought leadership, adaptability, resource mobilisation, and responsiveness to social justice issues.

The word was appropriate to the time as it conveyed a responsiveness to the immediate need. But as time has worn on and Covid has started to become business-as-usual in many places, organisations are now turning again to long-term planning – for life beyond Covid.

Mask Making

Last year, we highlighted four Auroville units producing masks during the first wave of the pandemic. One of these units, Aire Masks, was already making high-end masks aimed at two-wheeler drivers wanting to reduce their exposure to pollution. During the first wave of the pandemic, the unit rapidly expanded its capacity and ramped up production from 50 to 100,000 masks per month to meet the need. And then, as Aire's founder Juan Felipe recounts, "the market suddenly became flooded with masks, and prices dropped". The Rs 300-400 Aire masks began to compete with masks selling for ten rupees, and it seemed people weren't too concerned about quality. "In India, there's generally not much quality control for masks," says Juan Felipe. "The manufacturers put an N95 sticker on a simple piece of fabric, and charge Rs 10."

At that time, Aire Masks also collaborated with doctors at the

Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), as the doctors were initially left to source and fund their own masks. While the doctors' orders have now stopped, Juan Felipe suggests that the Aire Masks are still highly valued there. One senior PIMS doctor still wears a mask (with changeable filter) that he purchased from Aire one year ago. "He doesn't want to change because, after one year of treating people with Covid [and not contracting the virus], he trusts that it's safe," says Juan Felipe.

The lull between the two waves of Covid enabled Aire to innovate and create new products. N99 filters, which offer a higher level of protection than N95, are now available in India. These are built into Aire's balaclavas or bandanas to protect riders from smoke and dust. A newly sourced, extremely soft bamboo fabric with a great capacity to absorb sweat reduces the amount of mouth bacteria lingering close to the skin.

These and other 'tweaks' have been newly incorporated into Aire's

people's endocrine systems. Millions of people are dying from the bad air in India. It's as if they don't know how to solve the problem." In response to the problem, he not only founded Aire Masks but also a website that promotes awareness of pollution in India. The website encourages people to take action, to join anti-pollution advocacy projects, and to network. "People know there's pollution, but then what? There are actions they can take, in addition to wearing masks, and the website helps them to find people to collaborate with, ideally creating a movement in the process."

Juan Felipe raises the dilemma of responding to the Covid pandemic through mask-making, when his real focus is on anti-pollution measures. "We're not opportunists. I felt we were being a bit like big pharma, which needs illness to make money. I don't want to promote fear, and didn't expect to make money from people's fear." He points out that the intention of Aire's motto 'Be the Change', which encourages people's action against pollution, became somewhat compromised during the pandemic with its focus on masks as a protective measure against the virus.

"It's a strange time," says Juan Felipe, "but it's also allowed us to continue to develop our product range. Auroville offers different ways of doing things. Covid will pass, and perhaps one day pollution will too. Until then, Aire Masks will still be here."

Three other Auroville units also turned their hand to making masks in the first wave, even though none of them had made masks before. Fashion units Upasana and Miniature repurposed their staff and fabrics to stitch simple cotton masks for the market. Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) also turned to mask-making, as a social service and income-generating activity for marginalised women,

and this initiative is still continuing. To date, a total of 100,000 masks have been made by AVAG during the two waves, and another 4,000 are currently being stitched for children in local government schools.

Ventilators

We also reported in the August 2020 issue about two Auroville teams that were inspired to produce low-tech, affordable and easily replicable ventilators, in order to help Indian health services. Ventilators are life-saving devices that assist breathing, which have been in short supply in some states in India during the two waves.

The JASAN team – Jorge, Akash, Sukrit, Alex and Nigel – collaborated with PIMS to develop their ventilator, and were at the testing stage when we last reported. The team has since brought their invention to the certification stage, and is currently waiting to hear back from an investor who is interested in mass producing it.

The Tusky ventilator, created by Samvit, was also being advised by PIMS medical experts when we reported last year. The ventilator is now in late stage research and development, in collaboration with an incubator. The team is now looking for funding to take the project to the next milestone of making prototypes for medical testing. Samvit has also been approached to teach local school students how to make ventilators.

Post-Pivot

In the fast-moving and fickle world of business-buzzword trends, 'pivot' has already started to appear in the lists of 'Most annoying words of 2021' and 'Buzzwords to Cut' as Covid becomes the 'new normal'. Meanwhile, Auroville's entrepreneurs continue to tinker with and refine their inventions, with the aim of long-term benefit for all.

Lesley

PHOTO: COURTESY AIRE MASKS



Aire Masks

While the unit continued to sell about 5000 masks per month for some time, orders have now stabilised at about 1000-2000 per month. Naturally, the number of staff has dropped, from twelve at the peak to four at present.

Aire has shifted its focus back to creating products that offer protection from pollution, such as bandanas (worn over the mouth) and balaclavas (mostly targeted at the professional biker market), while still also producing Covid masks. "The virus will pass, hopefully, but pollution will most likely still be a problem across India," says Juan Felipe. "If we continue to offer the best quality, people will continue to buy our masks."

range, after an extended product testing period. Juan Felipe explains that part of Aire's modus operandi is to always consider two key questions: "How can we create for Auroville?" and "What should the relation be to the workers?" So, to ensure the new Aire products could meet the challenges of Auroville's sweaty heat, the staff in Auroville's Financial Service helped test them. "They are key people. If they get ill, the economy of Auroville will suffer." The staff approved.

While pollution levels in India came down during the first wave of the pandemic, Juan Felipe points out that levels have risen again. "The pollution in Chennai is terrible, and affects

MOBILITY LIGHT

The speeds of Auroville

An overview for the benefit of mobility dummies

Stationary: in the still point of the Matrimandir. Fleeting but oh so welcome.

Strolling: in the Matrimandir gardens, or walking through a forest; connecting with and opening to your surroundings.

Medium pace: a somewhat rare sighting, apart from the odd dog owner being walked.

Ghostly fast: marathon runners preparing for their February summit, glistening, topless torsos.

Languid: the dharmic pace of our bovine friends.

Accelerated: village dogs curled up asleep to full snarl in 0-2 seconds.

Bicycle: the natural pace of Auroville for getting around its spread-out quilt of a community.

Bicycle speedsters: older men and women clad in lycra and fingerless gloves jumping over road bunds, in packs of four to six.

Electric bikes: the new popular mongrel beast on the block, half bicycle, half scooter. Uses cycle lanes whilst hardly needing to pedal. Noticeably faster than a bicycle, closer to scooter speed, especially when 'uphill'.

Old TVS moped: bustling and noisy with obligatory fume belching storm as it starts, the

trustworthy sire for many an old timer.

Electric scooter: slightly slower than TVS, often driven by lanky phlegmatic youths with one hand. Numberplate-less and eerily quiet.

Motorbikes: fast, unless meandering pace as half the drivers have a neck cocked at 45

degrees as they talk on their mobile, weaving somewhat. Frequently occupied by whole families (one of whom can hold the phone).

Auroville teenagers on motorbikes: (with extra option of no sound mufflers) fearfully fast and often skillful.

Electric cars: slow tortoise-like pace. The Reva is great for getting around Auroville, but a sitting duck on the East Coast Road.

Local cars: medium paced as the drivers know from years of inhalation the dusty legacy of a car passing you by. Often driven by those who grew up here, fed up with their parent's austerity. Blaring funky music.

Visiting cars: either driven slower than even a Reva, with head at 90 degrees as they warily view the safari inhabitants they have driven hours to see. On the East Coast Road with fast scattering cyclists in their wake.

Taxis: generally slow to medium within Auroville, knowing every pot hole.

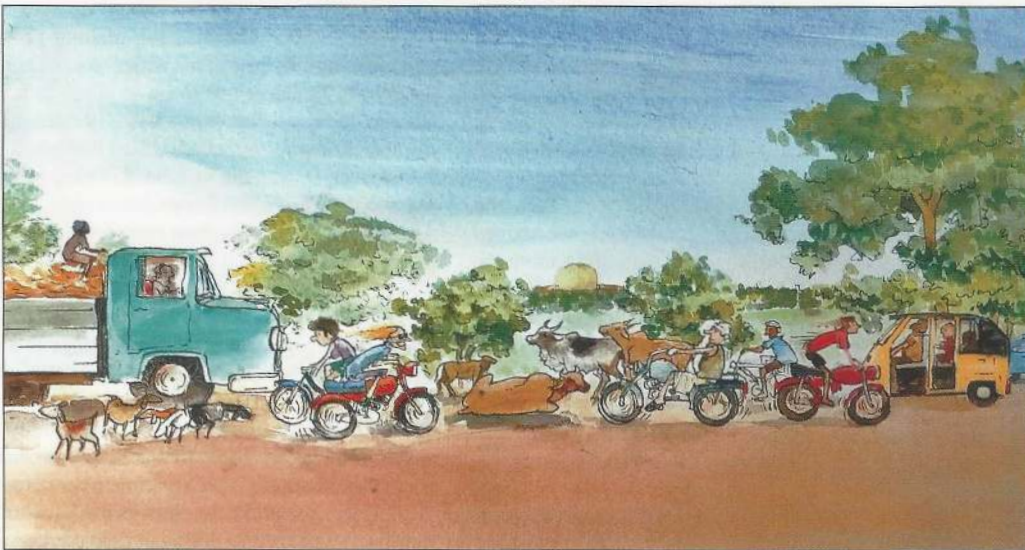
White SUVs: sensible 'chauffeur' pace. For politicians visiting their green belt hotels and/or real estate agents in crisply ironed spotless white lungis. Tinted windows.

Rickshaws and delivery vans: furious weaving spurts of pace.

Trucks and Buses on the Kulapalayam to Edyanchavedy tar road: full pelt ahead down the middle of the road. Get out of the way or join the hordes of squashed red coupling beetles.

Peter

CARTOON: CHARUDUTTA



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