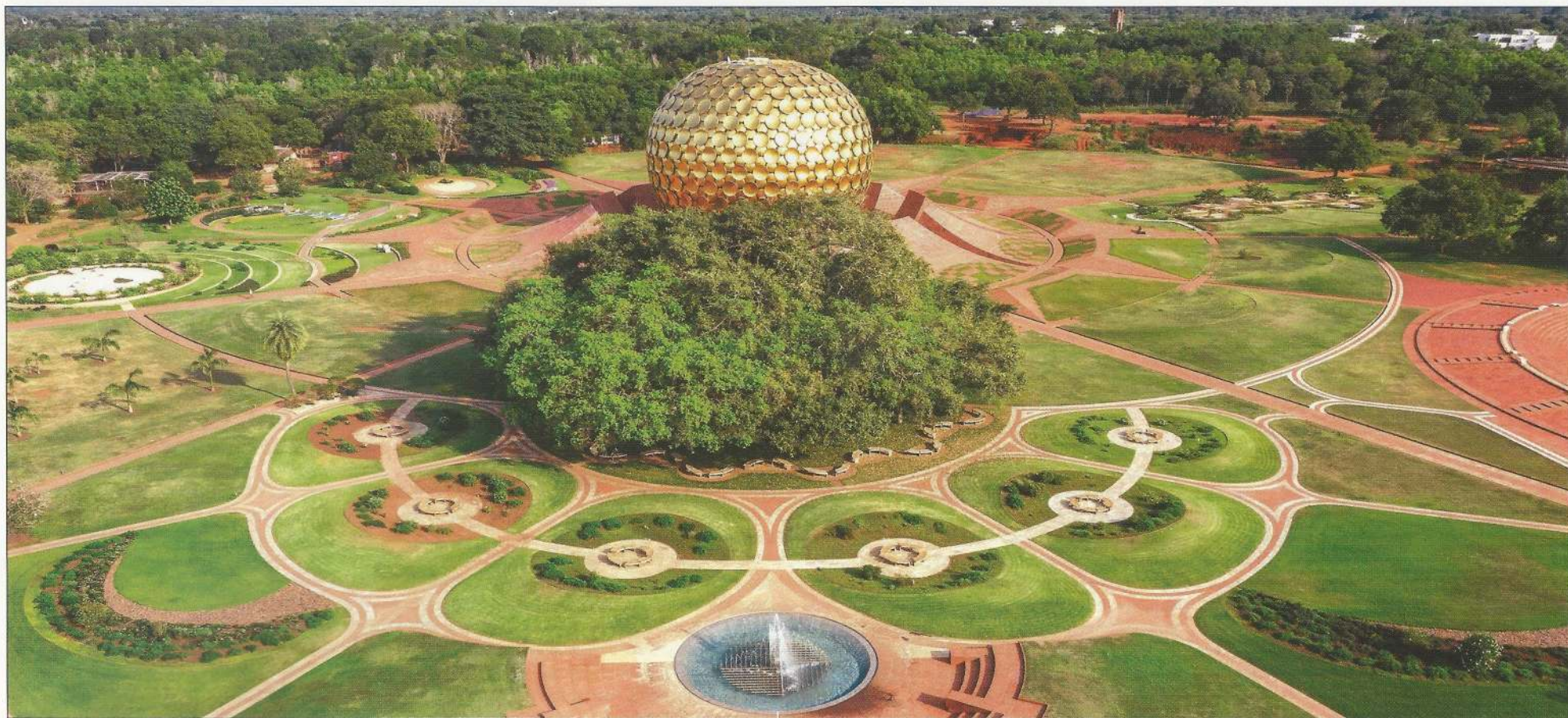


## Matrimandir – the blossoming of the heaven-sent Lotus

Fifty years ago, on February 21st, 1971, the foundation stone for the Matrimandir was laid.



Aerial photo of the Matrimandir, with the Banyan tree prominently in front and before that, the fountain in the Unity Garden

**F**ifty years ago the Mother described her visions of the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir. A seed was planted, a Divine impetus was sent forth... The Lotus that is the Matrimandir would soon begin its slow emergence from the deep red earth of Auroville.

The emergence was inexorable. In spite of all difficulties, both material and human, the blossoming of the Lotus continued over five decades with unabated strength.

If it had been for us alone, the human instruments of its construction, the Matrimandir may not have emerged, or surely not so readily, from its deep crater in the soil of the land. It was the invisible Divine sunlight shining down from above that assured its steady blossoming.

Those who worked on the construction all attested to the energy supporting the work, to the Sunshine that they mostly could not see, but that they could feel. It supported them through all the obstacles, gave strength, gave solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems, and always brought that inner smile that sustains all progress.

The first phase of the blossoming was the emergence of the four great pillars that curved upwards to ultimately join in the ring of union at the top, cast on May 29th, 1976.

Some 30 meters high, this stark concrete structure rose in complete contrast to the flat red land of the Auroville plain on which it stood. Only the first young growth of newly planted trees accompanied it on the wide open plateau. It was a bold Divine statement that could be seen from miles around, proclaiming the advent of the full Lotus which was to come.

Later in the same year the 24-metre wide floor of the future Inner Chamber was cast giving at once a clear impression of the dimension of the space that was to come. The 12 Chamber walls were built next and then came the casting of the sections of the sloping roof of the Chamber. Finally, in early 1978, the concrete shell of the Chamber was done. More and more the Inner Chamber began to materialize itself.

Human times were difficult, but that Divine Sunshine sustained

the growth of this lotus, which the Mother had referred to as the soul of Auroville.

Twin spiral ramps were built and lifted, section by section into place, joining the lower levels of the Matrimandir structure to the entrance doors of the Chamber – pathways which future generations would ascend, climbing from the concrete base to reach the silence of the Inner Chamber.

The next phase of the blossoming of the Lotus took almost a decade... this was the time when the sphere of the building was created, giving Matrimandir its global shape; the body of the Lotus became more apparent in its outlines.

In these long quiet years, the 1100 precast beams of the structure were prepared in the Matrimandir workshop, cured in a pool nearby, and then lifted, one by one, to be fixed precisely in place to create, layer by horizontal layer, the flattened sphere of Matrimandir.

All this time the Inner Chamber stood silent and apparently empty. As if, after it had materialized in 1978, the Chamber space needed time to integrate itself within our human world-frame. Or, perhaps it was the reverse – that we needed this time to get ready to carry on the work within its walls to finalize this very special space.

Finally the time came, with the assembly of the outer sphere completed and the top cap concreted on 8th August 1988, to begin work on the materialization of the details of the Inner Chamber.

The ceiling was given a coat of plaster of Paris, and then the walls were clad with the pristine slabs of white marble that had been brought carefully from Italy almost a decade earlier. The twelve columns were lifted up from the workshops below, one by one. Each was fixed in place with a pre-stressed cable running down its centre to give stability.

From time to time one would pause, awed by the beauty, by the enormity of the space that was being created here, high above the wide Auroville plain.

A marble floor was laid, and then the circular marble slab was carefully placed in the center of the room and etched with the

Mother's symbol. Soon would come the four Sri Aurobindo's symbols and then, crowing all, the 70 centimetre optical glass globe, focal point of the room.

All the while, the device to direct the sun ray was being tested and perfected, to reflect that clear single ray of sun down from the centre of the roof to strike the globe, and then softly illumine the space of the Inner Chamber.

By 1994 the Inner Chamber was complete, virtually as we see it today, with its wide white carpet and silent air-conditioned space.

The completion of the Inner Chamber released a burst of activity to complete the sphere as a whole. The defining shape of the twelve petals surrounding the central bud of the Lotus appeared during the 1990's. The solid outer skin was filled in to cover the bare spherical space frame of concrete beams. The final covering of shining golden discs was created and fixed, to give the Golden Lotus its happy visible response to the hidden Sunshine that had nurtured its growth for so many years.

In the most recent decade of its growth, the Matrimandir is being held, more and more, within a green and varied garden space. Pink and white lotuses bloom in its quiet pools, to accompany the Golden Lotus at the center.

There is still much to be done. The garden spaces continue to grow, to be developed. The water body, a lake, which the Mother envisioned as surrounding the whole oval of the Matrimandir gardens, has begun to manifest.

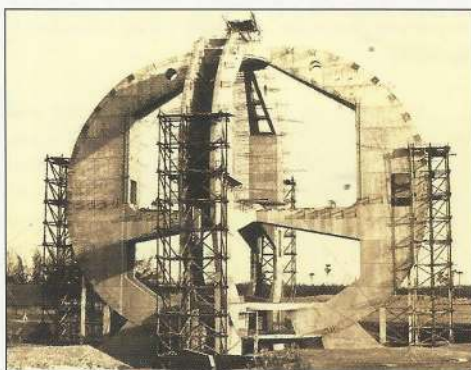
As the Lotus of the Matrimandir continues to grow and blossom it becomes more and more the symbol that the Mother had described *the living symbol of Auroville's aspiration for the Divine and the symbol of the Divine's answer to man's aspiration for perfection.*

The thousands of people who have contributed to its growth, in myriad ways, can only be grateful – grateful to the Sunshine that has sustained its growth over these 50 years, and grateful to have participated, in whichever way, in the growth of this very special gift from the Mother.

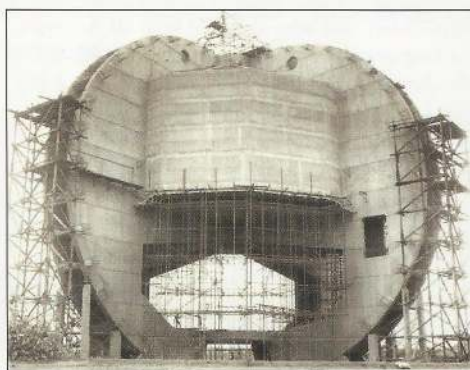
John Harper



Excavating the area



Finalising the four pillars



The room nearing completion



The spaceframe seen from the air

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## Experiencing the Working Committee

In February this year the community selected new members for four major working groups. Christine asked Carel, whose term of office has come to an end after serving two terms in the Working Committee, about his 6-years experience.

**Christine: What is the Working Committee and what is its work?**

**Carel:** The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly is an Auroville working group that is constituted by the Auroville Foundation Act. The Act mentions that its function is "to assist the Residents' Assembly or, as the case may be, the Governing Board, in discharging its duties under this Act." This is a very broad description. To help people understand its work, we published a long list of our work areas and the responsibilities which we have been dealing with in the past years. During the selection process, I spoke about each of these in detail.

**A major job seems to be maintaining contact with officials of the Government of India in New Delhi.**

Yes, by correspondence and by paying regular visits. Before COVID, we were in New Delhi at least once every two months, interacting with the Ministry of Human Resource Development or HRD Ministry [recently renamed the Ministry of Education, eds.] on Auroville affairs; with the Ministry of Home Affairs on visa issues; with the Ministry of Finance on the Goods and Services Tax and on income tax exemptions; and with other ministries on a case by case basis.

The most important ministry is the Ministry of Education which is the nodal ministry for the Auroville Foundation. We have been interacting with this Ministry on specific topics relating to the Auroville Foundation, such as the changing of the Rules of the Auroville Foundation, pending since 1997; the appointment of the members of the International Advisory Council, vacant for the last four years; the appointment of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, vacant since June 2019; the appointment of members of the Governing Board, who vacated office in November last year; and the Government of India grant for Auroville and the Auroville Foundation. This grant was on average Rs 16 crores in the last few years. However, in this financial year the grant has been substantially reduced to about Rs 1.5 crores. All this suggests that the Auroville Foundation is not ranking high in the Ministry's thoughts and that regular contact is necessary to remind them of Auroville's existence and its needs.

**What about the contact with officials of the Tamil Nadu Government?**

The contact is on many levels. We have been interacting with secretaries of the Tamil Nadu Government in Chennai on how a New Town Development Authority could be set up to protect Auroville; how coastal protection can be ensured, as some of our beach communities will be disappearing into the sea if no action is taken; and how the Auroville Foundation can consolidate the lands in the city area of Auroville so that the Auroville Master Plan can manifest. We also have regular interactions with the Collector, the sub-Collector, the Tahsildar and the Block Development Officer of the Villupuram district. The COVID-19 situation brought contact with the Tamil Nadu Health Secretary and the Block Medical Officer. Last but not least, there are many interactions with the police to protect the lands of Auroville from encroachment, and when issues arise involving individual Aurovilians.

**How was the Working Committee's collaboration with the former Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation?**

Sometimes it was difficult. We were expecting active help in manifesting Auroville – promoting and ensuring the growth and development of Auroville is a prime function of the Board – but that was not always given. The Chairman has been consistently helpful, as was one Board member who graciously assisted with the appeal of the Auroville Foundation in an income tax matter and in the highway issue. Other members gave a lot of their time in helping out on certain occasions. But we also encountered mistrust and lack of cooperation.

**Can you highlight one or more issues where the expected help was not given?**

A major one is the land. In June 2020 we expressed to the Chairman our deep concern that Auroville will not be able to manifest unless the Auroville Foundation owns all the land within the City Area. We asked the Board to request the HRD



The seven members of the former Working Committee. From left: Selvaraj, Partha, Carel, Chali, Sauro, Ranjith and Jürgen.

Ministry for a grant or a long-term interest-free loan to purchase the remaining land in the City Area of Auroville; and to interact with the Government of Tamil Nadu to get statutory protection for Auroville and approve necessary land acquisition in the City Area. Though the Chairman responded that he shares the concerns and would take the matter up with the HRD Ministry, we have never been informed about the follow-up on our request. The request was repeated in the Working Committee's submission to the Governing Board for its meeting in November last year. But the minutes of that meeting, which were only received in the last week of February this year, only mention that the proposals are recommended for taking necessary action by the new Board and the Ministry as appropriate.

**And the mistrust?**

There are many instances. A major example is the Board's secret decision to ask for an investigation by India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into the accusations of an individual named Vikram Ram who is living outside Auroville. He has been spreading malicious and unfounded allegations about Auroville and individual Aurovilians to high Government of India officials and through postings on Facebook, on other social media platforms and on the Internet.

The Board made this decision at the instigation of an Enquiry Committee appointed by the Board and consisting of three of its members. Though the Committee gave opportunity to Vikram Ram to substantiate his accusations, and gave Mr. Srinivasmurthy, our Under Secretary, a hearing to defend himself against specific allegations against him, it did not give such opportunity to any of the accused Aurovilians, and neither asked the Working Committee for its views. Instead, and even though the committee explicitly stated it was not equipped to deal with the complaints, it concluded that there was a prima facie case for investigation and recommended to the Board to hand the matter over to a central investigative agency.

The Board accepted the recommendation of the Enquiry Committee. But it never communicated this decision to the Working Committee, and ignored the Working Committee's request for a copy of the Enquiry Committee's report. Also the minutes of the meeting in which this decision was taken were not shared with the Working Committee. Auroville only got the report from Vikram Ram who had obtained a copy from the HRD Ministry after filing a Right to Information application, and who shared it with all Auroville. [A long article on this issue has been published in the January 2020 issue of Auroville Today # 366, eds.]

**You also mentioned the lack of cooperation ...**

An example of the lack of cooperation is the implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 in Auroville. This Act aims at protecting women from sexual harassment at their workplace. Large companies have to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee which investigates an allegation of sexual harassment, and then recommends to the employer to take certain actions against the perpetrator of the crime.

But the implementation of this Act for the Auroville Foundation is complicated as the Auroville Foundation consists of over 700 small units, and the Act was evidently not written for such a complex structure. After obtaining the

advice of three senior lawyers, the Working Committee constituted an Internal Complaints Committee which was tasked to deal with all instances of sexual harassment, whether occurring in any of the Foundation units, or involving a household worker, or a guest or volunteer. The Working Committee was designated as 'employer'.

This structure was not only deemed legally sound by the three lawyers but was also approved by the Minister for Human Resource Development. Yet, two Governing Board members raised objections against the structure, and consequently, the Working Committee was unable in a proven case of sexual harassment to take action as 'employer' against the perpetrator and the workplace, who were both uncooperative in following the recommendations of the ICC.

To date this issue is not resolved. In its meeting of September 2019, the Board advised that the Auroville Foundation office organize a workshop on the subject to arrive at a legally tenable decision by inviting experts and legal advisors in the field, and that the Office of the Secretary may seek advice from the Ministry of Law through the HRD ministry. All this has not happened.

**Is the Board always correctly informed about what happens in Auroville?**

I don't think so. For example, the Board stated in the minutes of its meeting of January 2020 that the Working Committee was not adhering to the government's Travel and Daily Allowance expenditure. We were flabbergasted because the Working Committee, when in New Delhi, always stays for free at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch. The Board had not raised this issue during its meeting with the Working Committee, so that we could have corrected the mistake.

The mistrust of these Board members may also have its origins in the many emails the Board members have constantly been receiving from some Aurovilians or some groups of Aurovilians, complaining about happenings in Auroville and trying to involve the Board. One of the Board members even decided to regularly come to Auroville to meet members of the community including, as he wrote, "those against whom Working Committee have some issues," to ascertain facts first-hand. We replied that we had no issue against anybody, and that we hoped that his visit would lead to an increase in communal harmony. It didn't.

**Is the Working Committee involved in other important issues for Auroville's long term development?**

A major issue is finding ways to secure and protect the land. Then there is the issue of visas, where we have been successful, in close coordination with the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, to get satisfactory arrangements for Aurovilians, volunteers and guests. During the COVID time, the Working Committee was very active in trying to prevent cases in Auroville, for which it set up and acted jointly with the COVID Task Force. Lastly, there is the issue of the official Entry and Exit regulations, with its accompanying documents the Entry and Exit Policies. We are working on fine-tuning these documents.

But apart from these, the work is very much on a case by case basis and we had little time to think about future planning. Moreover, other working groups have their own planning tasks, such as on economy and financial management which rest with the Funds and Assets Management

Committee (FAMC), and planning the township which is the work of the Town Development Council (TDC).

**Did the Working Committee collaborate with other major working groups?**

With some more than with others. We had an intense interaction with the Auroville Council which we met once a week and more often when necessary. Many decisions were taken jointly. Together with some FAMC members, we met with the Land Board every week to discuss ongoing land issues such as land protection and purchase of new lands. The Entry Board sought our help in difficult cases. With the Town Development Council there was less contact. With the FAMC we met when required, and worked jointly with them when necessary.

For example, when the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was introduced and we had to figure out how it applied to Auroville, a small group of FAMC and Working Committee members visited authorities in Calcutta and New Delhi, with the result that we were able to obtain a GST exemption on all maintenances paid by Auroville.

We were also collaborating with the FAMC in the Government of India Grants Group, which we set up in order to streamline the allocation, the accounting and the project management of all Government of India grants to Auroville. It was a very useful group, but in January 2020 the Governing Board decided for formal reasons that there is no need for a GoI grant group and that this task should be performed by FAMC, thus effectively removing the Working Committee from all Government of India grant work.

We just learned from its minutes of its meeting in November that the Board changed its position. It now directed the Working Committee to submit to the Secretary, Auroville Foundation, detailed proposals on the revised Government of India grant estimate 2020-2021 and the Government of India budget estimate 2021-2022 for scrutiny and recommending to the Ministry of Education.

**Are these working groups accountable to the Working Committee?**

No, each working group has its own mandate and responsibility. The Working Committee is not the highest or ultimate authority. In theory, all working groups are accountable to the Residents' Assembly, but this is not enforced. Some working groups report regularly about their work, others irregularly or not at all, and the Residents' Assembly has not evolved a system to ensure such a regular reporting, let alone a system to express its displeasure with the work of a working group or to request its dismissal or the dismissal of one or more of its members.

**So if the Working Committee is not happy with the performance of another working group ...**

Then, in essence, there is nothing the Working Committee can do. For example, the FAMC has become rather unpopular because of its Code of Conduct for units of the Auroville Foundation, which is considered too bureaucratic, and the FAMC is seen as too authoritarian. Likewise, the TDC is criticized because of its lengthy site and building approval processes, which are considered as a bureaucratic barrier to progress, and for the absence of detailed development plans. But the Working Committee cannot interfere.

*continued on page 3*



## Experiencing the Working Committee

continued from page 2

### Do you agree with the criticism?

Speaking as an individual, and not representing the Working Committee, yes, but only to some extent. It's easy to make a strong judgment about a decision or a non-decision of a working group, but those judgments rarely take the complexity of the work of a working group into account. The FAMC, for example, has to act in accordance with an increasing number of regulations from the Government of India to manage the assets of the Auroville Foundation and to ensure a proper internal accounting of all units and trusts of the Foundation. That's a huge job and we should acknowledge the substantial progress the FAMC has been making, and understand that it is in this context that a Code of Conduct has been formulated.

Likewise, the TDC has had serious difficulties to function as, till recently, it only had two members and few staff doing the work and no government funds to support it. Moreover, it is blocked in much of its planning work as there are such different points of view in the community on the implementation of the Master Plan.

With that understanding the issues that are cause for concern should be addressed, perhaps not by the working group itself, but by an unbiased group such as the Auroville Council.

### Has the last Working Committee made any serious mistakes?

Every working group and every person makes mistakes. So did we in this Working Committee, for example when misjudging a situation. I personally regret three. The first is, we overruled the objections from people in the community towards a

person becoming an Aurovilian, as these objections were invalid in Indian law. But in hindsight I believe it was a wrong decision, seeing how the person later behaved in Auroville.

Another was sending a letter too quickly to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways when a highway was threatened to be laid through Auroville. This happened during the holidays, when few other members were in office. I pleaded that the Ministry should protect the Forecomers sanctuary; this was interpreted as agreeing with the rest of the proposed routing. Happily, this mistake was later corrected by the Highway Team. The new alignment is now north of Auroville.

The third one was recommending that an Aurovilian who was beaten by another Aurovilian file a police complaint. This happened after the offender publicly expressed that he did not feel any remorse and refused to apologize. The Working Committee has no powers to impose a solution. As not doing anything would have left the offended party without any recourse, we finally recommended to her to file a police complaint. But we hadn't anticipated the subsequent arrest of the offender and his detainment in jail till he was granted bail. We all felt very bad about this. But the issue itself is still not resolved, neither at the level of the Indian judiciary nor within Auroville.

### The Working Committee is often seen as a 'power' group. Is this correct?

No, it isn't. The only 'power' is in appointing members of various groups, such as the members of the Internal Complaints Committee; and together with other working groups, selecting members of the Land Board and executives of the Matrimandir. For a major part, the work is administrative; another large part is conflict resolution with outside parties. Sometimes I refer to this group as

the waste paper basket of the community.

### Is there not a risk of becoming cynical in this job?

There is a risk. For example, when you feel that members of the community try to use the Working Committee to resolve their personal relationship issues or problems with people they hired, or ask for the Working Committee's intervention when their carpenter has not done his job. It is also sometimes difficult to continue doing your work when there are trust issues. I was once told by a member of the Governing Board that I was seen by other members as 'always defending Auroville,' so I was considered 'not reliable'. It's a point of view with which I do not agree, and I have shrugged it off. But it rankled.

### Do you consider that your work was "work for The Mother?"

Aie!! I don't like to say that. I see too many of my own personal shortcomings that I have any right to make such statements. The maximum I can say is that I believe I've worked hard for Auroville and that I hope that I have been a bit open to The Mother, so that She was able to work through me.

### What was a major learning for you in these years?

The big learning came during the first three-year term when Mandakini and Elisa were members of the Working Committee. They are very process-oriented, while I am goal-oriented. I want to realize things and am not interested in an elaborate process to reach there. They showed me that I was often too fast in my approach and that things could be done differently. I owe them a debt of gratitude for that.

### How well did the last seven working committee members work together?

Very well, in fact. The work is too vast to be done by one person and a specialised task division spontaneously developed with everybody taking up a share of the work. The three Tamil members, Ranjith, Partha and Selvaraj, each took up a large part. Ranjith focused on land matters, Partha had an almost daily contact with the local police officers, and Selvaraj interacted with local officials. Sauro's strength was in land and planning matters, and Chali and I brought some skills in writing and communication, as well as our experience of being in previous Working Committees. Jürgen did a fantastic job in organizing the Auroville celebrations in New Delhi, Calcutta, and Baroda. The team was great.

### Do you have any suggestions for those who will take up the job?

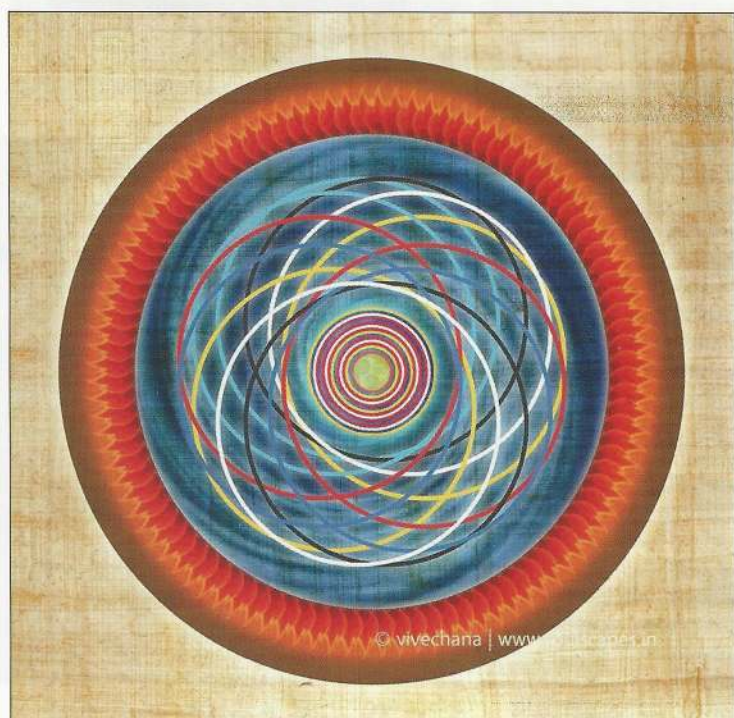
I suggest they intensify the contacts with the central and state governments. I also suggest that they promote that one or two active senior Aurovilians become a member of the Governing Board. This was the case in the past when Roger Anger, Aster Patel and Ashok Chatterjee were members. Having Aurovilians on the Board would, I believe, make the Board be more in consonance with The Mother's statement that *Only those who have resolved to stay in Auroville for good have the right to intervene in its organization*. It would prevent mishaps such as requesting the involvement of the CBI, or Board members acting on accusations from individual Aurovilians. More importantly, those members would be able to strengthen the Board in helping the development of Auroville.

In conversation with Christine

## FUNDRAISING

## Art for Land

The sixth annual edition of the Art for Land exhibition opened on 31st January at the Unity Pavilion. The entire month of 'art with heart' included concerts, performances, talks and other events such as the Generosity Fair. Through sales of donated artworks, the Art for Land initiative aims to make a significant contribution to fundraising towards Auroville's land consolidation. It is also a recognised showcase for the creativity of Auroville's artists, as well as for artist friends from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the Auroville International Centres, and from wider India and abroad. The artworks include paintings, sculpture, ceramics and photography, which can be viewed at [artforlandonline.com](http://artforlandonline.com)



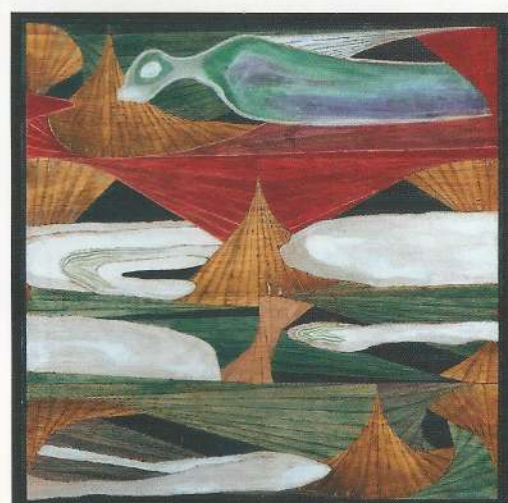
Cosmic by Vivechana Saraf



Wild Light by Verena



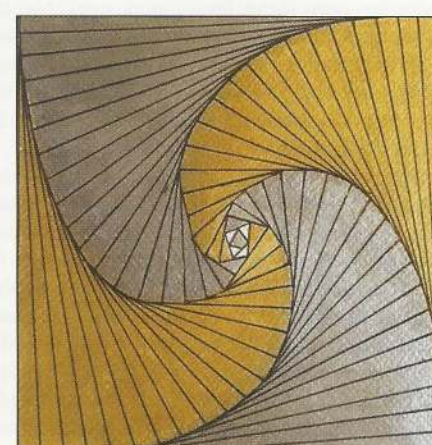
Genesis by Grazi



Observer of the mind by Crystal



We are family by Adil



Optical Illusion by Shinso



# Multi-culti unity

When moving to Auroville, do people let go of their 'base cultures' or do they nurture those habits and traditions in their new life here? Is there an 'Auroville culture' or do we have it here, Divya set out to determine the role of culture in their relationships. Given all the different origins, religions and languages in Auroville, there is fertile ground for diff

Let's delve deeper into the topic of culture. As per Merriam Webster, culture is "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group".

When moving to Auroville, most of the interviewees for this article left behind many traditions, especially the religious ones. Abha P. (who is Indian and married to Agni, a Frenchman) noted: "From my childhood, perhaps due to my colonial style education, I felt at odds with some of the traditional rituals in my conservative Hindu upbringing." Srimoyi (from India) adds: "I don't believe in the Pujas though I fully believe in the Gods and Goddesses, but have my own way of relating to them, because Auroville is supposed to transcend religion and religious ceremonies. The different festivals which used to seem fun in the world outside feel completely out of place in Auroville, and therefore it does not interest me to take part in them anymore."

However, not all culture-related aspects are negative. Many Aurovilians, including those in mixed culture relationships, organize or participate in various festivals from both their cultures, such as Christmas, Diwali, Pongal or Rakshabandhan. The purpose is generally to share their own fond childhood memories with their families and children. As Chaitanya (a Belgian who was born and grew up in Auroville) says: "Auroville is so diverse; it is a big melting pot. In my childhood we were celebrating local festivals, and Christmas to a certain extent, as well as



Abha P. and Agni

women will stand up to insist that it is absolutely a correct statement and that there are studies to prove it! Of course, then 'shopping' is used to make women the butt of rude humourless jokes.



Abha T., Claude and Smiti

Auroville's birthday, the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's", to which he and Pavneet (his Indian wife) have added elements of the Punjabi culture through celebration and festivities. For all these couples and families, it is always about enjoying the celebration and creating unforgettable moments, including dressing up, eating good food, and decorating the house with flowers and candles.

## Customs, families and social groups

In most cases, the interviewees feel that the cultural clashes they experienced came from outside the relationship, that is from society or external sources, and they do not find it difficult to overcome these issues and work together towards a mutual understanding and acceptance.

India is often viewed as a patriarchal society, where gender and assigned roles can be a touchy subject. Yet, Krishna, an Indian woman who has a German partner, explains that patriarchy is just as prevalent in developed countries: "The box that Germans place women in is really irritating. The box we have here in India is surely different and strong, but I'm used to negotiating with this box, while the German one leaves me flabbergasted. Actually, I find that Germany is as patriarchal as India, only much less overt. My Indian women friends identify and counter the patriarchy, while the educated German women I met live with that patriarchy and do not question it. One silly example is that there it is considered an axiomatic truth that women like to shop and men don't. Perfectly rational and well-educated

had to value myself and my womanhood before with regard to a man falling in love with me, or how sexy I dress, or how many boyfriends I had, which is an attitude which is so prevalent in Auroville. I feel there is no critical thinking about women's beauty and sexuality here."

In Western-Indian couples living here, some Westerners tend to be disgruntled by some aspects of the local prevailing culture, especially when it comes to conservative protocols regarding public display of affection or pregnancy-related customs. "When I was pregnant, the doctor didn't allow Suresh in the scan room at first," recounts Alice (from Italy), "but I insisted as I felt that was a beautiful moment to share. The doctor finally told us that he had nothing against it, but that customarily men in India are not too interested. It is usually the mother of the mother-to-be that stays inside with her daughter."

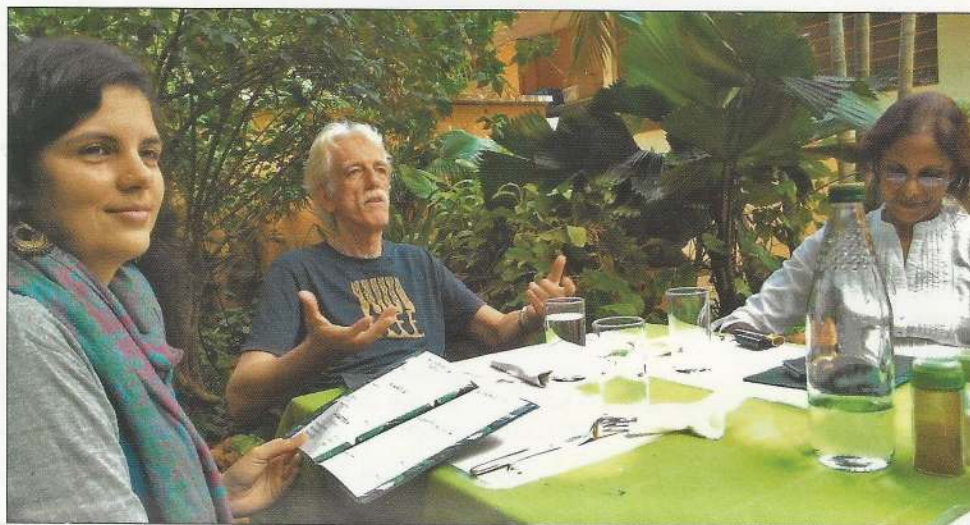
Sometimes, families initially don't like their children entering into a multi-cultural relationship, like Pavneet's family. "Instead of trying to fight my parents or their expectations, I embraced their resistance and simply gave them



Pavneet and Chaitanya

adjustments need to be made. Habits, such as greeting others (kissing each other noisily on the cheek vs doing Namaste from a distance), table manners or special occasions, can also differ from country to country, from culture to culture, which can sometimes lead to unintentional misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Srimoyi (who had two daughters from her



Aditi, Otto and Srimoyi

time to accept it," says Pavneet (Indian). "Unity wasn't going to happen if we didn't all embrace the situation, so in the end that brought us all together."

Albeit not very common in cross-cultural relationships, another point which Westerners do not always understand from the perspective of Indian culture is arranged marriages. In fact, it sometimes works even better than the non-arranged version. As long as the family has nurtured a loving atmosphere throughout, the choice is made with wisdom. Nevertheless, in the context of Auroville it is important that both partners are interested in Auroville and participate with conviction in this experiment. As Krishna emphasizes, the larger sense of being human should prevail over the familial and cultural difference.

## Upbringing, education and parenting

There is only a fine line between culture and familial habits, as Krishna points out: "Sometimes it's a cultural influence but you don't know this because it's such a deep conditioning." In fact, there are many small ingrained differences that stem from one's own upbringing and education, language and outlook on life, so

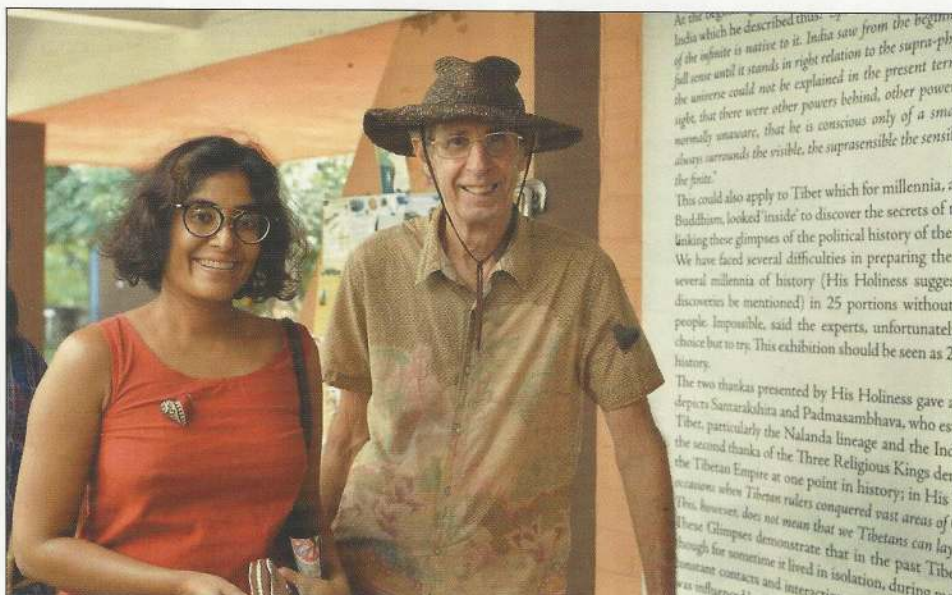
first marriage with a German, and has now been living with her Austrian partner for the last 24 years) points out that cultural clashes are inevitable, but these are generally balanced out by the positives of a relationship: "One learns to broaden one's perspective by making the effort to understand the other's point of view, appreciate the exposure to the beauty and richness of another culture in all its forms, and the possibility such a situation offers to widen one's horizon."

For parents, a topic of disagreement can concern, for example, the degree of 'freedom' granted to their children for things such as driving, going out, appropriate clothing, etc. Points of view are diverse on this matter, whether from the Occident or the Orient, without forgetting the rest of Asia as well as the Americas. Growing up (or living) in Russia was not fun for Sasha: he grew up in a village with his grandparents, eating very basic food and with a very strong education.

Thus, no matter where one comes from, such differences can also affect education principles and their application within families. In the end, many couples seemed to say that it is not so much a 'cultural clash' as a difference of opinion which obviously applies to all relationships, not multi-cultural ones alone.

## Language

Language plays an important role with regard to culture: not only do most people enjoy speaking their native language with compatriots, but also language skills can enrich – and be enriched by – multicultural relationships. Due to having multi-cultural parents, but also thanks to growing up in Auroville, most young people here can speak several languages. For parents such as Abha T. (Indian) and Claude (French), it seemed natural to speak to their daughter Smiti in their native tongues, the same goes for Rohin's family (he has a Belgian father and



Nandini and B



# Is the past really past?

live in a cultural void? As there are numerous multi-cultural couples and families, differences to come into conflict.



Indian mother) said: "We all speak English but my mom sometimes speaks to me in Tamil and my dad's side usually speaks in Flemish and French." Each language expresses a variety of feelings or events in a particular way, and can therefore add yet another viewpoint with regard to culture but also as to how people approach different situations.

## Auroville culture

In this particular context, let's look at Merriam Webster's second definition of 'culture': "the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time". Therefore, we probably have 'our own culture' here too, since our 'everyday existences' are so finely intertwined. Indeed, during numerous (social, communal) events in Auroville, one can easily get a full cross-section of cultures and ages from two to seventy plus.

This beautiful city in the making is located in South India, so it comes as no surprise that there is a prevalent Tamil or Indian culture here. While Auroville is not really 'traditional' as such, we have adopted the material traits of our surroundings. Most of us tend to dress suitably for the climate and eat local foods, just as we would have adapted to another lifestyle in another environment. As Srimoyi points out: "We take off our shoes outside the house because it is a hygienic practice, not only in India but in many other countries in the world."

Pavneet states: "Leaving things behind and starting completely afresh is not entirely possible in Auroville. Actually, when living here I was even more drawn to look into my own cultural identity and roots, as well as the idea and reasoning behind things." At the same time, by accepting other cultures and also nurturing your own, a wider feeling of sharing can be attained, such as sharing meals, gifts or food with neighbours and friends for

coming here. I spotted some of those 'typical' German habits bang on when I went there, such as for example how proud Germans are about their locks (and safety), or how a draught is the cause of all illnesses." Christoph agreed about the locks, and we had a good laugh with regard to the draught.

Despite dissimilarities that arise in Auroville because of different cultural backgrounds, families, countries and professional backgrounds, there are so many other similarities in terms of human nature: personality, lifestyle, politics and philosophy. As Smiti said: "More than having traditions from my parents, I feel I've learned from the fabric of Auroville that's woven with so many people I've grown up with. What Auroville stands for was always more of a base in my upbringing than my parents' cultural background." Srimoyi adds: "What all human beings understand, appreciate and respect are genuine good will, sincerity, respect, love and affection. Whatever form they come in, they never fail to touch people and show a way out of friction, misunderstanding and difficult situations."

India fosters a different perspective, and most people coming to Auroville also strive to gain a deeper and higher understanding of things. As Sabrina (Indian) experienced when visiting the country her partner comes from: "In England, there was more resistance to acknowledging or thinking about something beyond your daily routine and life, whereas there's an openness in India to look beyond that. In Auroville especially, there is more will to find out something beyond your existence."

Indeed, commitment to Auroville and its ideals is a must for anyone who decides to live here. Abha T., whose partner is French, notes that "sharing a common path in this yoga of Mother and Sri Aurobindo was of primary importance – it makes all other hurdles merely something one goes through. The deeper self doesn't have these boundaries, and living in that is one's aspiration and attempt." Mihong (Korean) and Jean-Yves (French) add: "There are no particular traditions to be transmitted, we are here to find something which does not belong to traditions."

Nevertheless, in our quest to achieve human unity, we must learn to embrace differences in others and not impose our understanding of life upon anyone. "In Auroville we talk a lot about Unity in Diversity, but the stress is totally on 'unity'. Diversity is something to be overcome almost; we don't give it as much importance, yet we need to learn to hold the diversity, too," said Krishna.

In the end, gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures is actually very enriching. Pavneet notes: "Diversity is just so much fun, getting to know about other cultures certainly does add to my happiness index. Detachment from something very religious and dogmatic is needed to live here, but you can still have your roots and don't have to let go of your culture to live up to the ideals of this place."

In conclusion, it seems that many people drawn to Auroville either came from a multi-cultural environment or did not feel particularly attached to their base culture. Nandini (ethnic Indian born in Dutch Guyana, South America, and raised in Holland) and B (USA), for example, don't even think of themselves as a mixed couple: "Our backgrounds provide more richness to our interactions and we did not have to resolve or overcome any particular traditions because they are superseded by other values like health, personal growth, the ideals of Auroville and Integral Yoga."

Life in a mixed couple implies getting to know more of the other country, the spirit and soul behind that culture. As Mary (an American who was married to an Indian) put it, "I feel very fortunate and grateful that I have the opportunity to broaden my understanding and appreciation of differences – and also the similarities – in human beings."

Divya Lieser

**I**sometimes think that Aurovilians feel, when they join Auroville, they have sloughed off the past like a dead skin, to emerge as new-born citizens of the world, unshackled from the influence of birth and nationality.

This is not necessarily true. In fact, in some cases people's national characteristics even seem to become exaggerated here, partly, perhaps, as a reaction to being surrounded by so many cultures different from their own.

Generally, however, cultural influences may be there in less obvious ways, for example in tacit assumptions that our perspective upon the world is the only one available.

Take individualism. It is easy for many western-born people to assume that individualism, defined by Merriam-Webster as "a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount," is a universal good that everybody in the world is striving, or should strive, to attain. This, however, may be yet another example of western cultural arrogance. In the Far East, for example, where Confucian values are still influential, or in many Aboriginal cultures, the cult of the individual seems less important than being part of and being defined by a larger social order. The Xhosa term *ubuntu*, "I am because you are", is the classic expression of this.

Or take the notion of freedom, liberty. Different cultures have understood this in very different ways. For many in the West, the classic text is John Stuart Mill's essay 'On Liberty', published in 1859, where he argues that free speech should be tolerated, even when it offends, except when it would cause actual harm ("the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others"). This is a 'negative' conception of freedom – of being free from outer restraint, something much loved by libertarians – whereas Eastern religions and philosophies have tended to emphasize a more 'positive', inner conception of freedom, most obviously in the sense of the liberation from ignorance of the true nature of reality or the Self.

Or take the concept of progress itself. The idea that we are relentlessly arrowing into a better future is very much a western concept, and a relatively recent one at that. Traditional societies usually have a cyclical view of history. Eastern cultures as a whole also tend to be more respectful of the wisdom of elders and ancestors than western future-oriented ones.

All these, of course, are generalizations. They don't take into account that we are individuals and respond in different ways to our cultural upbringing, that almost all variations of attitude and behaviour occur, to a certain extent, in almost all cultures (making the distinction between 'East' and 'West' a radical oversimplification), or that there are challenges even within cultures to previously accepted norms and conceptions (for example, the West's belief in unending material progress is now being challenged by many western as well as non-western thinkers). Moreover, there are also clear differences between even similar cultures. For example, the Dutch penchant for wide windows and refusal to draw curtains is not shared by the more private, curtain-drawing British, a difference which may also be reflected in the Dutch reputation for being far more outspoken.

Also, the world is changing; certain attitudes, like individualism and materialism, are becoming more prevalent, while old cultural norms are breaking down. When it comes to Auroville, it may be fair to assume that individuals drawn to this international project are less marked by their cultural upbringing than many of their compatriots back home. And even if they arrive here with well defined cultural identities, the sharp edges may be worn away by constant contact with the different cultures cohabiting in this place. (Although, some Aurovilians say they only began to appreciate their birth culture when they came here because they missed certain aspects of it.)

Auroville also breaks cultural norms by allowing Aurovilians to take up work, like sorting waste or preparing bodies for burial or cremation at the Farewell Centre, which might be considered unacceptable work for them in their birth cultures.

Some may say that any attempt to define cultural differences runs the risk of being simplistic, even patronizing. Bearing in mind this caveat, I think we may still see different cultural influences at work in Auroville, even if they are in the form of tendencies rather than clearly-defined cultural fault lines (although it is interesting to speculate, for example, why so many Anglo-Saxons are drawn to work in the Greenbelt). This is a

sensitive area, so it needs to be emphasized that this is not about judging one culture better than another. It's simply identifying possible cultural differences, tendencies, in ways of comprehending and acting in the world.

So here are some tentative speculations. One concerns communication. It may be that an eastern tendency for indirect messaging, or even holding back views altogether, in order not to discomfort the receiver, to maintain harmony or for self-protection, sometimes clashes in Auroville with the western tendency to value the speaking of 'truth' in a forthright manner. And the western tendency to assume that rational verbalization is the prime tool of communication may not be shared by cultures which value more intuitive, personalized and heart-centred approaches. Or, indeed, cultures where what is not said can be as expressive as what is said.

Then again, the emphasis upon individualism may be reflected in the western assumption that during our election/selection events each individual will make up his or her own mind, whereas for some Indians loyalty to the family or kinship group may sometimes be a very powerful factor in how they choose to align themselves on certain topics, or whom they choose to support.

The western belief in equality, egalitarianism (in theory, if not always in practice), may also differ from a higher respect for formal hierarchies and status in the East. In Westerners, egalitarianism can degenerate into rudeness, disrespect, lack of sensitivity; in Asians, respect may sometimes degenerate into excessive deference to convention or to those perceived to be of higher status.

Cultural influences may also be reflected in different responses to nationalism. In India and the East in general, people tend to display more pride, and have more respect for, their nation and birthright culture than would normally be expressed by many Westerners. In many western democracies it is taken for granted that the government or existing authorities can be criticized, even lampooned, in a way that would be considered unacceptable in many countries of the East.

These are meta-trends. At a more granular level, people in cross-cultural relationships may also notice cultural influences in the subtly different ways in which each partner behaves or relates to certain issues, in what can or cannot be expressed or even in what is considered humorous. For example, an Indian Aurovilian pointed out that in her culture they avoid talking about death, disaster, or accidents because it is believed that whatever you say gets the possibility to be manifested. Her western partner has no such qualms, and this can sometimes lead to tensions.

What are the lessons we can draw from all this? One is that the source of our misunderstandings, disagreements, in Auroville may sometimes be the result of different cultural conditioning, of different ways of looking at the world, rather than personal differences or disputes about ideology.

Secondly, it is important to consider how we respond to cultural differences. Ex-Governing Board member, Doudou Diène, pointed out that what he termed the inevitable 'tension' existing between cultures can lead to quite different outcomes. If we fear the differences and draw back for protection into our own cultural group, it can result in us discriminating against 'outsiders'. At its worst, this can degenerate into xenophobia and racism. But if we can accept, even celebrate, the differences, each cultural perspective has the potential to add something new to our understanding, for we learn that there is more than one way of understanding the world and constructing norms of conduct. Hopefully, this will make us pause the next time we assume that our particular cultural values are 'universal' ones that should be shared by or, worse, imposed upon others.

Thirdly, however, in the context of the Integral Yoga it points to the urgency of what Mother was expressing in *To Be a True Aurovilian*. For if we really seek 'Truth' with a capital 'T', ultimately we need to find a way to transcend these cultural influences.

*The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances.*

*At the centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.*

The first step in this journey, however, is to recognise that many of us are not yet autonomous, fully-independent beings, but are still strongly influenced by many factors. And these include our cultural upbringing...

Alan



# The Citizens' Assembly experiment

The Citizens' Assembly pilot project (see *Auroville Today* no. 365, Dec 2019) has concluded. Over the past three months, around thirty randomly selected participants have listened to presentations on various aspects of water, then agreed on a water vision for Auroville and ways in which it could be implemented.

What happened? What has been learned? And could this way of harnessing collective intelligence have a future in Auroville?

## The background

Citizens' Assemblies are attempts to encourage wide citizen participation in governance. Although the roots can be traced back to ancient Athens, there is renewed interest in the concept. Perhaps the best publicised Citizens' Assemblies to date were in Ireland, where they were influential regarding referenda on abortion and same sex marriage.

They may also be of particular relevance to Auroville. Citizens' Assemblies can support Auroville's ideals of human unity and unending education, and address challenges within Auroville's collective decision-making culture and processes. These include lack of engagement from the majority of the population, lack of diversity in those who participate, lack of understanding of the challenges the community faces, and lack of constructive communication skills, often leading to hostile and polarized dynamics in deliberations.

Citizens' Assemblies take different forms, but the core features remain the same. The random selection of participants, which may reflect a cross-section of the population; facilitated discussion of an important issue, or one that affects society at large, after inputs from various perspectives; and a final report which may contain recommendations for action. Each Citizens' Assembly dissolves once its task is completed.

## The Auroville pilot experiment

Preparation for the Auroville pilot began in August 2019. After the community suggested various topics, it was decided to focus upon coming up with a water vision for Auroville as the task for the first Citizens' Assembly. The topic met key criteria for such a process: in addition to the urgency of the issue, Auroville's water players were supportive of the experiment for it could provide an outcome they identified as an urgent need.

It was felt, however, that the water vision alone would not be enough to make a real change. The Assembly was therefore also asked to identify ideas for its implementation, suggestions on what needs to happen in order to deliver the vision, not technical solutions or a detailed strategy.

In January, a random selection of 120 participants was made from Aurovilians on the Master List, plus Newcomers and Auroville children older than 16 years. Thirty agreed to participate, and the first session was held on 8th March. However, the rest of the planned sessions had to be abandoned when the COVID-19 lockdown was implemented.

When sessions resumed at the end of October, certain COVID restrictions still operated so the original structure of the sessions had to be modified. Now the presentations were made on video, and the full group did not meet until the concluding sessions.

Following an introductory session that incorporated skill-building elements around listening and bias, there were five evidence sessions that followed a common format.

Participants watched videos of Aurovilians talking about their work with water, the challenges they faced, and their ideas for a water vision and how it could be implemented. The presentations were followed by small group discussions where participants shared ideas, then prioritized those most relevant for a water vision and its implementation. These were collected on 'mind maps' (a way of recording suggestions/concepts in a non-linear form) which could be referred back to in subsequent sessions.

On 22nd December a panel session was organized at which seven of the presenters, chosen by the participants, answered questions put to them by the participants. Two more sessions followed in which some presenters engaged less formally with participants.

## The outcome

The final two sessions were the crucial ones. In the first, participants used the knowledge they had acquired over the past months to come up with a water vision for Auroville. After being reminded of what makes a good vision statement, in small groups they worked on the mind maps to make a final prioritization of what needed to be included in that vision.



Small group discussion during the Citizens' Assembly

The outcome was eight sentences, which a large majority of the group approved. However, some felt there was room for improvement. Consequently, a small sub-group crafted a distilled version as their vision recommendation to the whole group.

*In the Spirit of Auroville, we will:*

◆ **Honour the sacredness of water** by recognising it as an eternal source of life, of healing and intelligence and by conserving and protecting all water as our sacred inheritance.

◆ **Embrace unity in diversity** by using water as an opportunity to unite and collaborate within and beyond our boundaries; welcoming diverse, sustainable approaches to nurture our land and to sustain all life.

◆ **Create a water conscious society** by integrating local and global wisdom and acting boldly with openness toward new possibilities.

This was subsequently adopted by the whole Assembly. However, it was agreed that the previous version would also be shared with the community as a more detailed version.

The main purpose of the final session was to gauge the collective support for each of the 57 ideas for implementing the water vision collected over the previous weeks. Participants reviewed them in small groups, then individually indicated their support for each idea. These were then combined to determine the collective will of the Assembly.

These are suggestions for those who have the skills, expertise and energy to weave them into detailed strategies and projects. However, given the knowledge that had been built in the Assembly, participants were asked what they saw as the most urgent issues. From this it emerged that the top six urgent priorities for implementation were:

◆ **Prioritise water in all levels of planning** – identifying key water zones, reviewing the Master Plan with water as a priority and ensuring new development has systems to capture rainwater, recycle water and reduce pollution (i.e. shared kitchen, laundry).

◆ **Create a community-endorsed independent/neutral implementation group** to coordinate works and take decisions on water issues, consulting with existing groups/experts and connecting to and supporting those interested in water.

◆ **Create an Auroville water budget** mandated by the community, which is accountable.

◆ **Map the current situation** to understand where water is being used in Auroville and what are the critical opportunities to take funds/support.

◆ **Bring stakeholders** – experts, users, governance – together to explore blockages to working together (with the support of a skilled mediator).

◆ **Establish systems to enable two-way sharing between the bioregion and Auroville.** Share Auroville knowledge and learn from traditional wisdom and local programmes (i.e. Puducherry 'water rich').

The final hour was devoted to exploring further ideas of how the vision and implementation outputs of the Assembly could be taken forward. One sub-group explored the idea of holding a Water Fair, another group began formulating ideas for creating a Water Board to facilitate communication and coordinate all water activities. Both these groups agreed to work further on these ideas.

## Evaluating the experiment

The key research question was, "To what extent can the Citizens' Assembly model support capacity-building and participation in collective decision-making processes in Auroville towards realizing its ideals of human unity and unending education?"

This was evaluated on parameters like quality of participation; capacity building; process; outcome and education.

The pilot proved very largely successful on all these fronts. Regarding the education aspect, participants agreed there had been a marked improvement in their knowledge of the water situation in Auroville due to the quality of the presentations, as well as the small discussion group format which they felt enabled deep exploration of the topic. This was reflected in the quality of the Assembly's final recommendations, which challenged the belief that only 'experts' in a particular field can provide wise counsel.

Participants also said the learning exercises enabled them to become more conscious of the importance of understanding and connecting with others, and more aware of their biases.

However, the educational dividend extended beyond the participants. The presenters learned better how to communicate their knowledge, while one of the core team members said the most rewarding part was "working with a diverse (organizing) team that included newer members of the community, people raised in Auroville, and others who've been here longer, yet who were able to give space to new leadership".

Nevertheless, it was felt there is room for improvement. Although there were a few guided meditation and free expression sessions, generally the emphasis was upon verbal communication. While translation facilities were provided for Tamil speakers who requested it, those participants who lacked verbal facility in their own language or English may have been disadvantaged at times, particularly in the final sessions when knowledge of the nuances of English was at a premium (in fact, the three participants who required simultaneous translation dropped out before the end of the process). As one of the core team members put it, "Perhaps we need to put more effort into being culturally sensitive to other ways of knowing, being and deciding".

Again, one participant may have spoken for others when he mentioned that he felt that the consciousness aspect of the work and the "large vision of Auroville" had not been sufficiently emphasized in the discussions or outcome.

Finally, while everybody seemed happy with the vision statement, it is questionable whether the final prioritization of implementation ideas really reflected the attention given to certain proposals over the previous weeks. "I felt a little uncomfortable with the voting and the rating system at the end. A lot of richness was lost here," commented one of the core team members. This may reflect what one participant referred to as the "lack of synthetic capacity after very good analytical work", while another commented, "Too much democracy. The law of the many is not = truth."

Regarding the social aspect of the experiment, the question was whether randomly chosen individuals, from very different backgrounds and age groups, could collaborate as a group to achieve a common objective. While the social impact is hard to quantify, observations along with their own feedback suggest they worked together very well. In fact, one participant said that the most rewarding part was the 'mutual respect and listening', another celebrated a "safe space where diversity meets unity", while for another the highlight was "interacting with Aurovilians I had never met before".

Interestingly, overall participants felt the most rewarding part of the Assembly was not the outcome but the process, particularly the way in which the discussions enabled them to consider other people's points of view.

The training in listening and discussion skills, the establishment of ground rules to ensure that everybody was given space to express themselves freely, along with the skilled facilitation, undoubtedly played a large part in this. But perhaps the most important factor was the small group and pair discussions that allowed the shyer participants to gain confidence in their ability to make worthwhile contributions.

While these self-discovery stories may not feature in the final report, they may represent the most

powerful experiences for the individuals involved. Interestingly, 50% of participants said that they had rarely attended community meetings before. Now they believed the new skills they had learned would mean they would be much more likely to participate in future. Who knows what the ripple effect on our larger governance and deliberation structures will be of this infusion of newly-empowered individuals?

And who knows what the material and subtle effects will be of so many people – presenters, participants, organizers, translators, film-makers, well over a hundred in all – focusing so intensively over such a long time on the topic of water?

Overall, the response of the participants to the pilot was overwhelmingly positive. During the final 'check out' circle, participants shared how impressed they had been by the professionalism of the whole process, and were deeply grateful for the immense amount of background work which had made it such a worthwhile exercise.

"Amazing work, don't let it be forgotten," wrote one.

## What next?

Whilst there are many elements which will determine the success of this model, for the community the quality of the recommendations and their ability to be implemented are of prime importance. The next step, then, was to get the main water players' response to the recommendations and their suggestions about how they could be taken forward. This happened on 13th February.

While the water vision was widely welcomed, the implementation suggestions scored lower. However, this seemed a comment on the difficulty of implementing them in their current form: as one water player explained, these proposals need to be broken down into practical steps before they can be materialized.

However, the main concern of the water players (as well as the participants) was how to maintain the momentum. Consequently, a water vision implementation group, comprising those involved in the Citizens' Assembly and the water players, is currently forming to help manifest the key actions identified.

The Assembly's recommendations will also be shared with working groups related to water issues, whose support will also be crucial. But perhaps even more crucial will be the creation of a groundswell for action within the larger community. This is why presentations are planned to share the process, the outcome and an evaluation of the Citizens' Assembly model for collective decision-making with the community. A report incorporating all the ideas formulated during the Assembly, as well as a description and analysis of the process and results – for this is a research project funded by SAI-IER – will also be made available to the community, along with public screenings of the films shown during the sessions.

## Does the Citizens' Assembly process have a future in Auroville?

An overwhelming majority of participants felt they would trust a Citizen's Assembly process for dealing with other community issues. The primary reason given for this was the 'random selection' composition of the assembly, which participants felt removed potential conflict of interest and created a context where all people could express themselves.

They appreciated that it provides a space in which important topics can be deliberated upon in a deep yet inclusive, non-confrontational manner, allowing valuable recommendations to emerge. "The outcome was a genuine collective process, no one voice dominated," said one, "It gives a taste of what a genuine community decision process could be like."

The core team echoed this. "It is still the most inclusive, participatory and fair model I have yet seen as a possibility for our collective decision making", wrote one. The water players were equally enthusiastic: almost 85% would like to see it used for other community issues.

In fact, suggestions for future topics have already been received. These include the Master Plan/town planning, the selection process, education and the economy.

It will be fascinating to see if the larger community agrees to provide longer-term support for this experiment...

Alan  
(member of the Citizens' Assembly  
organizing group)

Further information regarding the Citizens' Assembly project can be found at website: <https://caexplorationauroville.wordpress.com>.



# Ray Meeker's "Fire and Ice"

What do we write about the giant works of a 'giant' of ceramics – one who exhibits seldom and writes about his work even more seldom? Ray Meeker's recent exhibition at the Centre d'Art at Citadines gives us the rare opportunity to reflect on the work of a pioneer artist and a man who has constructed innovative buildings in Auroville. Along the spectrum of the artist as thinker and maker, Ray is a maker in the truest sense who does not generally produce or even read art criticism written about his own work.

Fifty years ago, Ray Meeker was a student of Peter Voulkos, an American ceramic artist as much known for the large scale of his works as for the way in which his massive hands parted and joined clay. Peter was most often seen throwing bowls on a wheel that scarcely a man could handle alone. I witnessed this myself as an undergrad at the New York State College of Ceramics: large groups of students and faculty crowded around the pottery studio, witnessing this unique and somewhat crude dance of man and clay.

Ray is similarly a figure in the ceramics world known for the physical performance of the grand scale of clay. Ray's work is so large scale that it's like figurative sculpture – rough bodies of stamped and parted clay. One might say that his work and his personality are wrapped together in enigma similar to Voulkos'. And yet Ray is a singularly modest man, with work and style characterized by a removal of personal ego.

Ray was also influenced in his early work by the fired clay houses of Nader Khalili, who scaled the common ceramic vessel up to the size of the inhabitable space. Thus Ray's work commonly jumped the scales from vessel, to figure, to building, firing for days until temperatures were high enough to vitrify the cross section of walls. In many respects, Ray's accomplishments in fired houses have surpassed that of Khalili. Only a few years ago, his widow Ilona Outram Khalili came all the way to India to see this legacy of Nader's work. Though only a few examples still stand in Auroville and the Pondicherry region, the local area is still the best gallery of this kind of work.

Ray is a craftsman's craftsman, cutting out excess words like a huge slab of cleaved clay. The thinkers love his work because it is true and sensuous material expression, rife with a million metaphors – and yet it evades simplistic language. Two dimensional words fail to capture the spirit of discovery in his work. Even for the most experienced writers, the fragments of text imprinted in his sculpture seem



PHOTO PIERO CELAFONI

world on account of their experiences at Golden Bridge.

And yet – after nearly fifty years – this was Ray's first exhibition in Auroville... a long overdue welcome. Ray is no longer creating his fired houses, as he did in the pioneering years in Auroville. But the exhibition "Fire and Ice" bears witness to his lifetime body of work – cross-continental shaping of the earth as by giants; the search for beauty in raw form, the imprinting of language and memory, the transformation of clay by firing.

Each of his pieces in "Fire and Ice" has personality and idiosyncrasy as if they are portraits, or individual figures. As far as I can see, "Fire and Ice" is a testament to human resilience – that endured through the extremes of exposure that makes us what we are. Beauty may be found in each twist of fate, or obscure detail – and no material is to be discarded. The gesture of the clay holds the imprint of the master's mood and action (quite like the work of Voulkos). Scrutiny of the apparently ugly reject-piece reveals exquisite textures from its formative processes. Such is the whim of the master craftsman; in creation and destruction. It makes us question if there can be such a thing as a mistake in the hands of the maker, when each accident becomes a means of further creation. Every action – cleaving, pressing, moulding, firing, glazing, firing – has an evidently clear intention. It is as though the artist is the witness of the self-realization of the clay.

And for every piece, the risk is calculated and close to the surface. Solid clay will explode in the kiln, and the larger the piece, the greater the risk. But these works have just the right hollowing out to withstand the forces of firing. For me, it is this delicate balance between creation and destruction – so technically mastered in Ray's entire body of work – that is so evocative on a conceptual level:

"Fire and Ice" refers to a short poem by Robert Frost, which queries if the world will be destroyed by the former or by the latter. Dominique Jacques writes evocatively about this post-apocalyptic nature of his work in the exhibition's frontis statement; monuments of a cataclysm, indexes of the earth's destruction now so fitting in age of rampant, post-industrial, global capitalism and global climate change. Some may see this work as an allegory of the earth's immanent destruction, an index of humanity survived through apocalypse. But I see Ray Meeker's search for beauty at the end of the world.

Lara

## PASSINGS

### Peter Kuhrt



Auroville's pioneer Peter Kuhrt – also known as Stream – passed away on January 28th in a Munich hospital due to heart failure. He was 76.

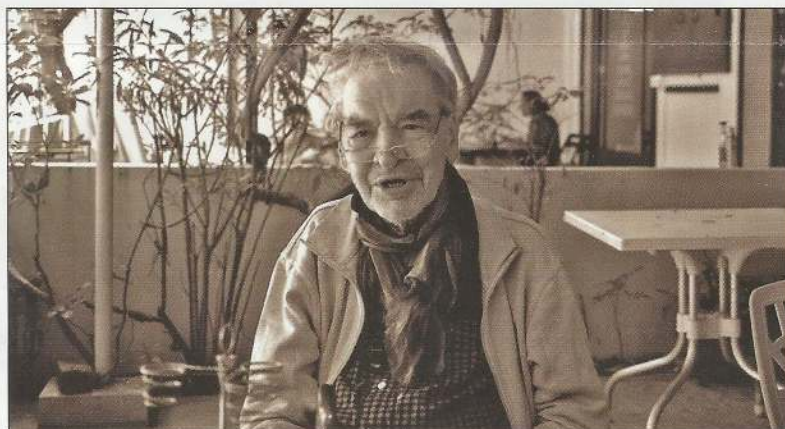
Peter came to Auroville with the caravan of 1969, together with Michel Klostermann, Christl, Joachim and Dorothee Hach. The group of Munich friends had read about the inauguration of Auroville in a German magazine and decided then and there to come. They had written to the Sri Aurobindo Society but never received an answer, so they just started off in an old Volkswagen bus, driving overland for six weeks and reaching Pondicherry in November, 1969. In due time the group was assigned some accommodation in Auroville's Aspiration community.

Originally born in East-Prussia, Peter had grown up and studied in Germany. In Auroville he stayed for a few years in Aspiration, doing garden work, working at the AuroPolyester unit, and growing more passionate about painting. Later on, he lived for some time in the Pump House and in Existence (naming it 'Edge of Existence').

Residents who know him from that time remember him as a quiet, interiorised person, very gentle and kind-hearted. They observed that the intensity of his inner life came through in his art, and that he, as an artist, saw himself in a state of transition, without thinking that he had "already arrived". He considered such thinking as the greatest danger to creativity. That he took on the name 'Stream' may be a reflection of this transitory stance.

After some ten years he left, feeling unsupported and insecure, realising that Auroville at that stage was not a place for artists. Friends who knew him in his later years in Germany tell us that he lived his life as an artist to the bone. He had no cell phone or internet, and lived with the utmost simplicity, only being concerned with painting, which was the strong yoga which carried him through everything. He was a true and faithful soul and Aurovilian until his last breath.

### Matthias Achenbach



On January 30th, Matthias passed away in his room at Mahalakshmi Home, ending a year-long struggle with cancer metastases in his lungs and brain. He had just celebrated his 74th birthday with close friends attending.

Having completed his studies in physics and pedagogy at Frankfurt's Main University in Germany, Matthias started out as an electro-mechanic. In his own words: "Very early I developed a fetish for all things technical and I liked to play guitar and double-bass and joined a pop-band and later a jazz-band, where I fell in love with the singer and she became my first wife. Then I became a private and commercial pilot, and started my first own company producing language-laboratories.

"In 1977, when I had just become 30 years of age, I travelled for the first time to India with a German jazz band (the Barrelhouse Jazzband from Frankfurt – they still play!). I very much liked it there and inquired how one could live there. We were playing for the German Cultural Institutes and it happened just then that they needed a new Regional Engineer for South Asia. I immediately applied for the job and by the end 1977 I was posted to New Delhi with the Goethe Institute (Max Mueller Bhavan) for the next five years."

While stationed in Delhi, Matthias with his (second) wife Marusch got to know about Auroville. Also, at times Aurovilians would stay in their house. The result was that the couple joined Auroville in 1984, and soon Matthias gravitated towards Aurelec, where computers were made. Having worked there for several years, he formed his own 'Altecs Energy Systems', which produced solar charge-controllers, PL-lamps and inverters, helping more than 100 houses in Auroville to become totally self-sufficient in solar energy. The unit manufactured its own inverters from 80VA to 5kVA and installed solar-pumps in and around Auroville. He thoroughly trained a large team of young aspiring Tamils. When Altecs had to close because it could no longer meet its loan repayment obligations, he went back to Germany to earn money to repay the loans. After he returned to Auroville, he organized the building of the multi-storey Altecs building in Auroshilpam and the Kailash Youth complex on the Crown Road.

Being the open, good willing and authentic person he was, Matthias helped others till the very end with his knowledge and expertise in electronic and other matters. In the beginning of 2020 his physical problems started, and after a first operation he quietly moved to Mahalakshmi Home, where he was warmly received. Very often surrounded by close friends, who helped him prepare for this challenging phase of his life, he was clear-headed, ready and faithful to go.

Matthias's remains were buried at the Adventure Burial and Cremation grounds on February 3rd, 2020.

### Dany Foureau



On February 4, Dany Foureau unexpectedly passed away due to sudden cardiac arrest in her room in the Mukti Complex near the AV Health Centre. She had been complaining about back pain after lifting a possibly too heavy load a week ago. She was 60 years old.

Dany, who hails from France, had a long history with Auroville. In the early seventies, she rebelliously left her parental home and joined a small community of friends in the Ardèche, where she stayed as young girl. Like several other members of that community, Dany came to Auroville in 1980, starting out in Forecomers. One of the things she did at the time was working with Otto in Kottakarai Bakery. She then moved to Revelation where she ran a small vegetable market. Later, she married an Indian man and the couple left for France around 1984. Some five years later she returned, with toddler son Salia, and worked for New Creation's Kindergarten while staying in New Creation Field community.

Several years later she left again, to return for good in 2014 on her own, her son being well established with his own family and two children. By now well versed in geriatric care, she joined the Auroville Health Service team, training new therapists and taking over its coordination. There followed a year in which she worked on the night shift of Auromode Apartments, during which time she also frequented the Auroville Integrated Animal Care Centre (IACC). In 2017 she left Auromode and took up full time work at IACC while living in Prayatna (as caretaker of the Newcomer accommodation there) and later moved to Mukti. It was at IACC that Dany came into her full element, joining the team of Kannan, Rita and Lorraine, and giving all her energy and passion to the hundreds of dogs in the centre's care.

Dany's remains were cremated at the Adventure Burial and Cremation grounds on February 7th.





Georgia and Samrat and their son, River

*"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come"*

William Wordsworth

Babies are hopefully 'made with love', arriving not just with 'clouds of glory' but also at times to exhausted parents. *Made with Love* is an initiative supporting Auroville's newborn families with food delivered right to their home. Set up two years ago by Rotem, a birth doula, (a person who supports women in labour and pregnancy) it was modelled on a similar concept from her Israeli home village, where there is a WhatsApp group arranging volunteers to cook a meal a day for families with new-borns.

"It's so simple," Rotem says. She sends her WhatsApp group of 45 supporters a link to a google document, including a description of who gave birth

and the size of their family. Her group consists mostly of young mothers; and they arrange food delivery for the first three weeks after a birth. She will often nudge individual volunteers to bring food if all the days are not fully covered.

The first few weeks after birth are a liminal moment between pregnancy and a baby's new life. Monique Gauthier, a midwife working with Auroville initiative *Morning Star*, points out that *Made with Love* allows families space to adjust to the reality that "somebody is dependent on you 24/7 for the foreseeable future." She notes that "post-partum is the time you'll never forget; it's a time of miracles, and of healing after birth." Rotem, who is beginning her process of becoming a Newcomer and has lived locally for the last eight years, recalls that "you are still bleeding, your organs have had a trauma." This support offers the mother's body a little more recovery time and an opportunity to integrate the birth experience and to bond with their child.

## Food

Georgia and Samrat from Anusuya have just given birth to their son, River. For Georgia, *Made with Love* is an appropriate title because she felt the food "really was made with love; people poured their heart into what they made." As a new mother it was "amazing, such a huge help for us to not have to think about food at such a precious time when we could just focus on being with River." Samrat agreed, noting that the food was prepared in a healthy way, conscious of the nourishment and breastfeeding needs of babies. Rotem clarifies that it's fine to buy food in as well and jokingly remembers, "I am not a good cook. The first time I tried to make something – an attempted Asian wok meal – I ended up giving it to my dog and bought

something from Bread and Chocolate instead!"

## The Gift of Time

The food delivery allows more quality family time together. Samrat remembers that after the birth, he still had to run around doing paperwork for the birth certificate, and that the food delivery "saves us grocery shopping, allowing us more time and space." Aurovillian Rebeca Lopez was inspired to support new parents by bringing food because she remembers new mums in her native Spain did not even have enough time to shower. For Lauren Chockman, whose two year old son Rudra was the first baby to start the programme, "it's a gift of time in those early days, one less thing to think about and more time with your baby."

## Other baby offerings

In addition to food delivery, there is another WhatsApp group for mums to pass on objects, share information or ask for advice, which was also started by Rotem some years back. Samrat says that "most baby clothes were provided for us – other mums pass things on and it's understood when we don't need them we will pass them on. Sharing has been taking place abundantly." Georgia and Samrat were grateful to the Morning Star team for taking care. For example, Krishna Lescure came twice to check on breastfeeding, and Shanti Gardelle provided information on how to carry your baby properly. Monique visited for the first five days after birth as did an osteopath. There is "so much home service, it's amazing," says Georgia.

## Community

*Made with Love* deepens the feeling of community for families. Rotem wanted to "bring some community here," and Georgia concurs, "I've real-



Rotem

ly started to feel community in Auroville when I became pregnant." For Lauren, *Made with Love* "helped me appreciate what community is and to meet other mothers, where I got a lot of breast feeding tips. It's so nurturing for a mum and also allows other people to start to have a relationship with your baby." Georgia recalls, "Most people bringing food were friends, and I really appreciated the opportunity to connect and share our birth story, because I had a lot to process and it was healing."

A new life is full of possibility, and in the City of the Dawn, *Made with Love* is one step enabling children and new parents to receive a nourishing and caring beginning in life.

Peter

## HUMOUR

## In search of Auroville's very own Yeti

As Auroville's forests have grown over the years, new wildlife corridors have evolved, which have brought new kinds of animals to the area. A large bear has reportedly been sighted in Pitchandikulam Forest in recent months. Could Auroville actually have its very own Auro Yeti? Or is this simply the stuff of urban myth? Inspired by the "Monkey Man" phenomenon that held the city of Delhi in its grip for two weeks in 2001, we imagine the life and times of AuroYeti in the city of dawn.

In Auroville during the lockdown, reports began to circulate about a strange human-size, monkey-like creature that appeared at night in Auroville. The creature was witnessed in Auroville's residential area, leaping across rooftops and flitting through the forest and across paths – inadvertently causing accidents as stunned Aurovillians swerved their two-wheelers in disbelief. When a diner at Neem Tree Café sighted the creature in the nearby trees, the subsequent panic caused a mass stampede, with at least two people sustaining broken bones.

Descriptions by people who claim they have glimpsed the creature vary widely, which suggests that it 'appears' in different shapes to different people. When this correspondent dashed to Cinema Paradiso following a tip-off that the creature was sighted slipping out surreptitiously as the end credits rolled on King Kong (the 1933 version), more than ten people gave dramatically different accounts. Some described him as a six-foot-tall monster covered in thick dark brown hair. (Descriptions always assumed a male.) Others describe a smaller creature with a human-like face and long hair, while others still have described him as wearing a mask like the comic book character, The Phantom.

Two children claimed the creature had steel springs on his feet, which enabled him to jump effortlessly across buildings. Some suggested he wore sunglasses and a black astronaut's helmet, while another eyewitness asserted she saw the monster gliding along the Crown on a fluoro green skateboard after midnight. Yet another suggested he may be an animatronic machine controlled by remote control, or even an extra-terrestrial.

Man or machine, beast, friend or foe, he is undoubtedly a creature of darkness. "He vanished into thin air when I held a light up to him," recounted AuroAte, who was startled by the creature while sleeping on her rooftop. Others have claimed they almost tumbled off their rooftops in a panic when awoken by cries of "The monkey man is here!" Yet others claimed that when they tried to approach the beast, he changed into a bird and took off into the skies with a mighty stroke of his wings.

While observers generally say he leaves no footprints, some large monkey-like footprints were recently found in the early morning in the Visitors' Centre grounds. Cynics have suggested that this is a blatant



CARTOON: CHAUDHUTA

attempt by certain elements to cash in on the monster's existence and attract tourists to Auroville. Or, alternatively, to scare unwanted tourists away.

The rumoured sightings continue to baffle authorities. An AuroYeti Task Force has been formed, which has been accepting dozens of distress calls. It has created an official AuroYeti Sighting

Register to follow up on credible reports, and has released an artist's impression drawing in the hope of catching the creature. Local police have filed a trespass case against the creature, painting it as a mixture of criminal, beast, and supernatural being. Over-zealous police have also mistakenly detained a couple of particularly hirsute Aurovillians, before quickly releasing them. In the meantime, additional Auroville security guards have been deployed across rooftops at night.

The task force is also launching a crack-down on rumour mongers and mischief-makers. "We're concerned that this might be some big practical joke," said task force member Auroskeptic, implying that 'suggestible people' were being manipulated with wild fantasies. "But we're also conscious that it might be a mass delusion, which may turn into mass hysteria if it can't be contained."

Conspiracy theorists, however, are asserting that it is no delusion. They argue it is merely the latest ploy of a shadowy world government that creates fear in order to render people fit for easier manipulation.

It's also possible that the Hindu monkey god, Hanuman, has made his way into public conceptions and the collective unconscious, says Auroskeptic. Hanuman, with his brawny chest and large club, is depicted in mythology as being able to leap across rooftops and fly – similar characteristics to the AuroYeti. As a much-loved Hindu deity, Hanuman is the point of connection for Auroville teens who have started maintaining torch-light vigils throughout the city and forest. "We don't want to hurt or catch him," said teenager AuroElpis, "but rather to make friends and understand him. He hasn't directly hurt anyone, and we want to keep him out of harm's way, so that the authorities don't lock him up. We're gonna invite him to a rave at the Youth Centre, and – if he's a cool dancer – we might even make a video that could go viral on Insta."

There are some concerns that the creature might be inspired by his viewing of King Kong climbing the Empire State Building, and may attempt to ascend Matrimandir at night. But is this merely an irrational fear of the unknown? A night guard at Matrimandir claims she saw the creature peacefully meditating under the banyan tree. Perhaps the creature has been drawn to Auroville's peaceful and unifying ideals, and there is nothing to worry about after all? If Auroville aspires to unity in diversity, shouldn't a hairy beast be included in this?

Lesley

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## Editorial team:

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