

# Roger Anger, the artist

Roger Anger, the artist is the first ever exhibition of the work of an artist who, by the age of 40, had won several prestigious architectural prizes, but who never exhibited his paintings or sculptures during his lifetime.

The Auroville Centre d'Art presented a collection of previously unseen drawings, collages and sculptures to mark the centenary of Roger Anger's birth.

These works convey the image of a versatile and all-embracing artist, pursuing his own ideal of beauty. An artist and a man in constant search, driven by a profound inner need.

A lover of arts from the four corners of the world, Roger was in touch with the innovative effervescence of revolutionary European movements. Following in the footsteps of artists who were at once painters, sculptors, architects, engineers and stage directors such as Calder and Tinguely, Dubuffet and Manrique, he wanted to try and explore absolutely everything.

He didn't yet know what challenge would be waiting for him in the India he loved so much, and in which he had already been travelling for several years. The project to build Auroville would shake up his life. His ideas and experiences would never be the same again.

His approach to art is joyful, humorous and tireless. In his vision of the physical world, all phenomena are linked, and the connections between their different manifestations are boundless. He drew everywhere, on scraps of paper and envelopes, and cut his sketches out and pasted them onto sheets of paper to make a kind of notebook that he would rework once again. He was profoundly interested in the relationships between shapes, materials and colours, opacity and transparency, and the energy flowing from juxtapositions.

It was in Auroville in 1996, when work on the Matrimandir slowed down, that he once again had the opportunity to immerse himself in his own art.

The collages and sculptures on display were created in his studio during this period. The collages evoke small abstract universes, landscapes that speak to the unconscious, three-dimensional dreams with Aztec reminiscences and science-fiction overtones that tell us that time does not exist.

During the same period, he was also building small-scale sculptures in polystyrene that would later be made into large-scale works in aluminium, bronze and cement. It was then that he definitively freed himself from anthropomorphism to create these sinuous figures that are so perplexing to the eye that one might almost think that the sculpture is in the vacuum chiselled around the form as much as in the form itself; like beings in a state of transition, whose essence allows them to exist from the visible to the invisible, caught between two worlds in their momentum towards a state yet to be defined.

We are inclined to think that it was Auroville that enabled him to achieve such a level of freedom and creation. His works take us to the brink of mystery, giving us a glimpse of the dream of a transformed future, like a promise within reach, a transcended impossibility.

Extracts from a text by  
Dominique Jacques

Jacqueline Lacoste, Roger Anger's long term companion and collaborator, came to Auroville in 1970. In a sunlit moment at the Centre d'Art exhibition *Roger Anger, l'artiste*, she shares insights into Roger's identity, where the lines separating artist and architect dissolve, and reflects on the transformative influence of his spiritual encounter with The Mother.

*We all know of Roger as Mother's architect for Auroville. Is Roger the artist a lesser-known facet of him?*

**Jacqueline:** It's actually a great part of who Roger is. We titled the exhibition *Roger, the Artist* because Roger is renowned as an architect, especially in France and in Auroville.

We chose this title to reveal another side of him because, even before delving into architecture, Roger was always immersed in drawing and painting. Seeing his interest in painting, his mother brought in a painting teacher, to introduce him to the world of painting.

So, his artistic journey began with painting, and architecture followed. It wasn't a career choice for him initially; his true calling lay in painting, art as a whole, and the pursuit of beauty. Circumstances, particularly during the war – as he has previously recounted to us – led him to architecture. It was during those tumultuous times that he encountered someone with a studio, who, recognising his genuine aptitude for architecture, invited him with a simple, 'come.'

In life, it's often the case that one may not initially aspire to a particular vocation, and circumstances end up guiding the way. His calling in architecture became his real and full purpose when The Mother needed an architect. She engaged him and brought him to Auroville.



Roger in his studio in Auromodelle

Paris where entrance halls saw partnerships with decorators, consistently blending architecture with sculpture or mosaics.

Take Last School as another example, with its front statues— a sculptor was brought in. The fusion of architecture and art remains a constant theme throughout Roger's career.

*How did his contact with The Mother touch his art?*

I'm unsure of the extent to which his contact with The Mother influenced his art, but I can attest that it profoundly touched his soul. Recounting his initial meeting with The Mother, he describes it as a sublime experience that irrevocably transformed his entire life. Interestingly, many are unaware that prior to encountering The Mother, Roger managed an architecture studio with a workforce of a hundred individuals, having already completed over a hundred buildings in Paris.

Such details remained shrouded in silence; even I stumbled upon this revelation in Anupama's book *Roger Anger: Research on Beauty Architecture 1953-2008*.

During our time in Paris, Roger occasionally gestured towards a building, casually mentioning his involvement in its design. However, he never resorted to showcasing the magnificent mosaic-clad entrance halls of those structures, as for him, that belonged to the past. From the moment he met The Mother, his gaze fixated forward, focusing entirely on The Mother, her work, and the realisation of the city of The Mother. Nothing else occupied his life. Remarkably, this dedication occurred at a time when he had just completed the towers of Grenoble, then the tallest inhabited skyscrapers in Europe, earning him the International Prize for Architecture at the age of 42—an age when most architects are typically starting their careers. But upon coming to Auroville, he turned the page entirely, dedicating his life wholeheartedly to The Mother.



Roger and Jacqueline working on a plan of Auroville

*Is there a difference between the two aspects of his being?*

Whether you observe Roger as the artist or Roger as the architect, his architectural creations, such as the schools and the houses at Auromodelle, exhibit a pronounced sculptural research. The entirety of Auromodelle's architecture is inherently sculptural. For Roger, it's all about research in the forms. In his work, even in Paris, for example, you won't find a building with a flat facade; there's always an added dimension.

When exploring his architecture, which is especially evident in projects like Auromodelle, the artistic essence seamlessly intertwines with the structural. The exhibition aimed to emphasise the term 'artist' to unveil another facet of his persona. However, to me, Roger the artist is manifest in his architectural endeavours—it's unmistakable. In many instances, he collaborated with sculptors or fellow artists, which is evident in his buildings in

*What was your experience being involved in this exhibition?*

Collaborating on the exhibition was an enriching experience for everyone involved. The presence of Roger's art served as a unifying force, creating a harmonious atmosphere that inspired us to dedicate ourselves to all the work involved to pull off an exhibition like this, which had been spontaneously organised a few months earlier.

This allowed life to flow again through these original artistic pieces that were stored away for so many years.

The collective commitment and shared passion for the project forged strong bonds among us, making the entire endeavour not only productive but also deeply fulfilling. The total harmony between us led to the success and the beauty of the exhibition, thanks to the collective joyful participation of the whole team at the Centre d'Art.

In conversation with Chandra



Jacqueline and Roger looking up at the Matrimandir under construction

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The Roger Anger Exhibition represents a homage dedicated to the artist's centenary, showing an extensive collection of drawings, collages, and sculptures

Roger Anger was not only an architect but also an artist. His artistic manner echoes his architectural sensibility but with a freer and more unbound expression. His artworks testify to a deep, introspective journey, combining shapes, colours, and textures in a subtle and haunting way.

The current exhibition is a tribute to the different facets of his extraordinary, free, and joyful personality, and shows how essential art was in the artist's life and his memory.

Roger Anger's abstract work process, object, and image asks questions, revises, and rewrites itself in the process of making. His artworks evoke a multitude of timeless gestures and iconic images but are positioned in a new context, generating a multifaceted combination of actions, methods, and possibilities that probe the full range of artistic expression. The artist aims to convey the complex, nature of the human experience through a harmonious ensemble, using a symphonic range of traces and lines. His art raises questions about the difference between thinking, seeing, and living.

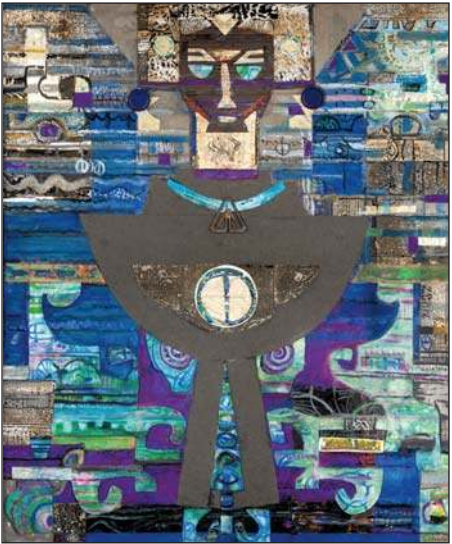
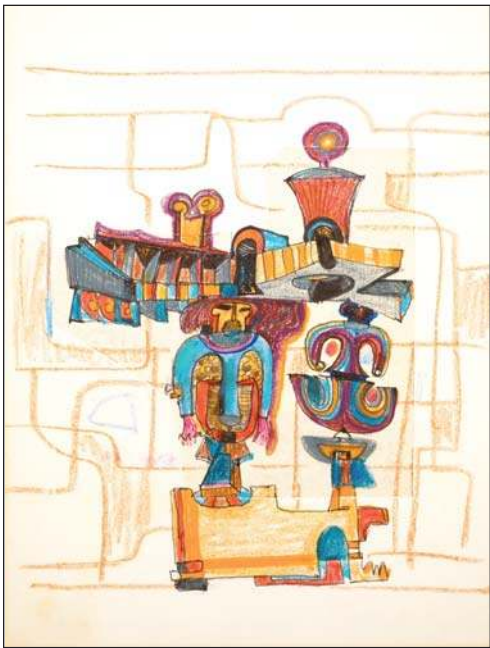
Roger Anger further reduces his pictorial content and reaches a point of almost complete abstraction in this group of works; they are influenced by memories, feelings, and humor.

Throughout the works, the figures are arranged in an impressive natural structure that defines the dynamics of the painting. There is an impression of weightlessness and supernatural transparency given by Roger Anger to these semi-abstract figures. However, as they blend, their appearance and movements ultimately lend a visual monumentality to the depiction. Roger Anger's imagination matches this perfectly, both in terms of the surface and landscape, but it's a more personal recollection than a precise visual reference; it's vague, appearing and disappearing again.

Roger Anger, the artist, has moved to the interface between architecture and art.

His visions are not simple building structures, but poetic compositions of light, colours, and shapes. In a world that often draws boundaries between 'practical' and 'aesthetic', Roger Anger combined these two dimensions. His works are testaments to a deep sensitivity to beauty and its resonance with human emotion. With a fine balance between modernity and timeless aesthetics, he has transformed the material into living works of art that carry a universal quality that combines the specific and the infinite, the material and the ephemeral.

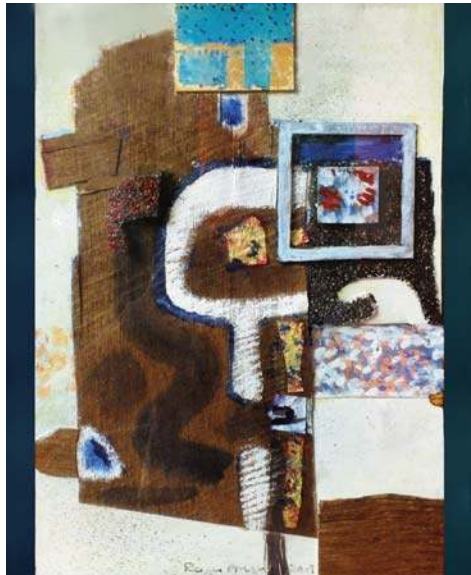
Laila Lille Khayati



## The Adesha I received from Roger Anger

Once, in later years, I went to see Roger in Auromodèle, but it was different from the other times I visited him. I cannot recall why I went there, to discuss what. The only thing I remember is that Roger took me to his working space in the basement, full of everything. He walked straight to one collage painting, with two dark teal-blue stripes painted on the sides, inserted into a wooden black frame, mat, and gave it to me. Not even his words I remember. It was strange, I felt as if I always knew that object – not some other in Roger's collection, no, that specific item and none else.

I took it home and hung it next to the drawings of my grandfather, a Futurist painter of Montmartre bohemia; doing this I felt it was the most natural thing in the world, as if it had always been there. Futurism and avant-garde Roger fitted like hand in glove. An intimate reality, the collage-painting, with no name, no history – can it have any? – stood as my talisman, my anchor and spear. I had been knighted. THAT world exists, beyond space and time. This is the tale of that primeval form, familiar to me and yet unfathomable. Eons pass by, the perfect, ideal society is forever: Auroville. Anything else is an illusion. There is no death. Only Reality.



Entering the exhibition of Roger's collage paintings, drawings, and sculptures at Citadine, I saw the genius. Those flamboyant art pieces are essential to decipher, somehow, Roger: his architecture streams from there. Not everything is on display; there is much more, caricatures,

architectural sketches, buildings like pyramids and flying saucers, evanescent spirals...

Roger left the body on 15 January 2008. Two months later I displayed at the Town Hall the first and only exhibition on Roger, up to the present one. Dominique Darr had passed me her photographs of Roger's architecture in Paris and Auroville; to these, I added four flex rolls with Roger's drawings, like firecrackers in the sky. I was about to display a second exhibition with only these, but Aryamani wished the same and I withdrew; she never did and now I am delighted that, fifteen years later, the real exhibits are on display. Would have things turned differently, if people had glimpses of Roger's psyche and of that other world?

At Citadine I went around, watching over and again every single piece. None evoked the painting collage that Roger had given me, an explosion of gold, silver, and savoy blue not featured there. But when at home I took pictures of it – the camera cannot translate its secret glow – I was surprised at how different the real collage-painting looked from the one I carried within while visiting the exhibition in Citadine. I am no longer aware of its contents, how it looked like when Roger gave it to me; at

home, it lies secluded in a semi-shade, beyond boundaries, ineffable... Roger gifted me an inner thing, the mirror of an inward reality, ever-changing, like clouds wandering in the sky. This is the adesha I received from him: to transform material reality into gold, silver, and savoy blue, and fly, "certain de la Victoire".

For Roger, as for the Mother, nothing was impossible: the Avatar's model town, sheer perfection, pure joy, exists forever. *Lapis philosophorum*, everyone in the crucible!

Paulette





# Exploring the inner being



From left: Iris, Dan and Carla

A few months ago, announcements appeared on various Auroville forums and in the *News and Notes* inviting Aurovilians to share their own experiential journey of seeking their inner/psychic being. The invitation was for participants to be as honest and to speak from the heart as much as possible and to avoid quotes and lectures. Over 50 Aurovilians responded, and 13 audio interviews have been done so far, of which five have been broadcast.

We spoke to the organising team to discover more about the intention behind the project, and their hopes for its impact both upon individuals and upon the community as a whole.

**AV Today: What was the origin of this project?**

**Dan:** There were several factors. I was translating Loretta's book on finding the psychic being into French. In parallel, I was part of a group reflecting on a possible new governance model for Auroville. We were studying the fundamentals, the Charter, the Dream, and To be a True Aurovilian, and in all these three documents the inner quest is an important element.

So just by focusing on the book and on governance something changed in my life. It was a time when I was facing serious external difficulties but this focus on the spiritual aspect allowed me to disregard the outer circumstances. And I understood that it is precisely in the most challenging situations that something very profound, an inner shift, can happen.

When I started talking about this to others, I understood that they were experiencing something similar, so we formed a small group to interview people who were willing to talk about their experience of an inner contact.

**Iris:** When I heard about this project, I was immediately interested because I'm doing healing work, which is very much centred on finding the connection within. I see many people who are struggling in this challenging time, and who experience such relief when they can switch to that inner connection, no matter what is happening outside. But I only work one-on-one, so I thought this project could be a way of spreading this awareness wider.

**Do you hope that when people listen to these interviews about people contacting or experiencing their inner being it will have a contagious effect? That something will be awakened or strengthened in them?**

**Dan:** Yes, because everybody in the community may have some contact with their psychic being but may not recognise it. So when they listen to what other people are expressing, perhaps they will recognise it or be awakened to it in themselves.

**Have any commonalities emerged regarding the interviewees' contact with their inner being? Or has each one's experience been absolutely different?**

**Iris:** Both. The commonality is the joy that comes through these people when they speak about it. It also affected us. After each interview we felt completely boosted up; there's something magical about listening to these experiences. Yet every person has a very different inner landscape, with a different perspective, different symbols, and they use different words.

**Carla:** This is why we never make judgements on whether someone's sharing is 'correct' or not, because there is no script to follow: the variation of the experience can be infinite.

**One commonality from the interviews so far seems to be that when people had a certain inner experience it was unexpected.**

**Carla:** I think for most people when they have been open something has come; but it is not planned.

**Dan:** For me, it's about discovering something that has been there forever. Through certain practices we may develop some abilities, but in the end we don't know what will trigger the experience. The intention of this project is not to set out a programme for everyone to follow: it's more to bring back this topic to the core of our lives.

**Mother and Sri Aurobindo said there is a danger in sharing one's inner experience with anyone except your guru because the**

**experience can be diluted or deformed through being expressed. There is also the danger that people will mistake the psychic being for something else. How do you respond to these caveats?**

**Carla:** My interpretation is different. To talk about the experience as a means of personal self-aggrandisement, as if the experience was important in and of itself, and one should promote, advertise, this to prove one's progress – this, for me, is where the danger lies. But if your intention in sharing it is just to open up the grace of the experience and you see it as just one step on your path, then I think it can be very helpful.

**Iris:** I agree; the difference is in the intention. We are here to share something that we feel is uplifting for others, and we need that right now given the present situation in Auroville. But, for me, there is also something more. I think the more we do and share things that uplift us, the more we increase the level of frequencies, the vibration, of the community in general. Then the things that are happening of a low vibration will not be sustainable: they will just fall off.

In fact, I think what we are experiencing right now with all these difficult conflicts is not the same as the conflicts which happened in the 1980s because we are not at the same vibrational frequency any more. There has been a certain progress.

**Dan:** In my understanding, the more we share these inner discoveries, the more we have the capacity to relate to each other in a deeper sense. And we are here for that.

**Is part of the point of the project to normalise discussions about the inner being, and to suggest that we don't have to wait until we have attained a very high level of progress to begin this work?**

**Iris:** Yes, because I've noticed in our interviews as well as in my personal practice that long-term Aurovilians are the shyest in terms of daring to consider that they may be in contact with their inner being. They say we're not there, it is far away. So this is a way of demystifying it.

**Dan:** We want to show it's not something that is out of reach; it is something that can be experienced now. It's a way for us to consciously relate and be connected with something which is different in us.

**Carla:** We hope through this project to normalise discussions about this topic in all areas of the community, because this will bring a lot more energy to the inner work. If we can appreciate that we are not perfect but we see we are all seeking, then we can't continue to see others as simply one-dimensional representatives of a point of view. We can't make an enemy of each other when we connect in that space of shared exploration.

**Have you noticed any effects upon the larger community since you started doing this exploration?**

**Dan:** It's a bit premature to assess this, but I am optimistic that if this inner quest receives more attention, little by little it will have a contagious effect upon the larger community. I already experience this in my network, with my friends, with my family. When we record these interviews in the Auroville Radio studio, we also experience some-

thing very uplifting. And then we carry this out with us into our other interactions, into meetings etc. My hope is that the more we do this, the more a larger shift in the community will happen, and this will act as a unifying force for our community.

**Iris:** We spent the first three or four weeks just doing interviews and only recently did we start to publish them on AV Radio. But what is interesting is that when the first interview was broadcast, around 200 people listened to it within the first day. Matthew of AV Radio said he had never seen such a response for any topic.

**Why do you think there is such an interest in this topic now?**

**Dan:** I think it is linked to the turmoil which is happening because we had to find new ways to be resilient.

**Carla:** This challenging time could be providing something needed to push us forward in this inner work.

**Iris, you are part of the Silent Presence Keepers group which silently meditates during meetings. The group has been doing this for seven years now. With this longer term experience, do you feel this work has had an impact?**

**Iris:** Definitely, although this depends upon how many people are in our group and the size of the meeting. When our group was big, then the impact was absolutely perceptible. We had a very interesting experience in Unity Pavilion about five years ago, when 80-90 people came together to talk about the state of Auroville at that time. For some time all they did was complain about what was happening; they were depressed about fractured relationships and people's inability to listen to each other.

When the participants started to work in sub-groups, we went off with a small group of 10-20 people to meditate in the Hall of Peace, inviting anybody who wished to join us in silence and meditation. The kind of meditation we practice in this case is in relation with the inner/psychic being: we actually contact it consciously. We couldn't hear what was going on in the big meeting, but we felt very much connected with what was happening there. And by the end of the day everything had changed. The same people who before had been complaining were now very enthusiastic about Auroville. It was unbelievable. Even the facilitators who were experienced in organising such gatherings couldn't understand what had happened, what had created the shift.

Our group also meditates during smaller, working group meetings. And working groups members said we were a calming, reassuring presence, and that they worked more efficiently and felt less drained after the meeting. Also, I think that being aware that somebody is sitting there in meditation while you are meeting causes you to pull yourself together, to not allow yourself to spread all your emotions around you.

**Do you have any sense of what an Auroville with a new focus upon individual and collective inner work could look like?**

**Carla:** I think we would be unified in our spiritual direction but each one of us would be different, our unique selves, and we would fully accept that we can be different because we would know we were heading on the same path. For me, this is what unity in diversity means.

**Dan:** Among many other things, I think we would be more compassionate with each other.

**Iris:** I think we would feel solidarity. There would be a quality of mutual respect which would be much more than superficial because we would be travelling in the same vehicle in the same direction, which is the development of our contact with the inner being, the psychic being, and beyond. This shared feeling, understanding, would be more present in our everyday contacts without us needing to speak about it. By just looking into each other's eyes it would be perceptible, palpable.

*From an interview by Alan*

*The interviews can be listened to on the following link: <https://www.aurovillerradio.org/author/inner-being-team/> If you would like to participate in or support this collective endeavour, please write to: [being@auroville.org.in](mailto:being@auroville.org.in)*

## REFLECTION

# Divine Comedy or the art of sewing the buttons of your shirt

*"Midway in the course of our life I found myself within a dark wood, where the right way was lost."*

*First line of the Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri*

I had been putting off sewing the torn buttons of my shirt, which was a pity, as I rather fancied myself in that particular snazzy shirt! My laidback nature slipped at times quite easily into indolence. And that was not all. Along with being unable to wear this favourite shirt, I had also lost the reins of my life! Yes, gone were the shiny-eyed days of the idealistic youth who believed that by the age of 21, he would have realised his soul and the soul would dictate clearly a roadmap to his life! Now I felt disoriented both in my personal life and in my life as part of the collectivity. Was it a midlife crisis? Sure, if feeling challenged and vulnerable emotionally to the pangs of a community in strife and being agitated could be called that, and along with it, it was a host of other things. It was the little me unable to figure it all out and be in the dri-

ver's seat. It was all the noise of the jukebox mind that went into repetitive inane patterns and was desperately attempting to cover the ever-growing silence within which needed but a little nudge to swallow me up forever in its mysterious folds. I felt that I was on a precipice, and the unknown beyond was both enticing and scary.

I was also genuinely baffled by the loud voices around that seemed to know it all! They seemed to have figured it all out! That was indeed puzzling to me. From where I was standing if I boarded one particular train of thought, perception and course of action, it would lead me to a specific station or destiny, and if I boarded another, it would lead me to another distinct destination. And who was to say that one was right and the other was wrong?!!! Perhaps the truth was above and beyond the little prison walls of these distinct stations? Where is the central station as one of my favourite gurus, Neem Karoli baba would have said? And is it so very hard to admit that I don't know yet that all-embracing expanse of truth that would heal the divisions? Do I admit to myself

that my convictions are also the boundaries that weigh me down, not giving space for the new to arise and transform? Perhaps a bit of humility and uncertainty is also the gap through which the Divine can enter and surprise us!

Anyway, I finally mustered enough will to get down to the business of sewing the buttons of my shirt. After all, if I had not learnt anything from my much vaunted Ashram education, at least it had taught me how to sew the buttons of my shirt! And with each rhythmic swish of the needle and thread through the linen, my mind fell silent, the inner turmoil and strife was stilled. I was one with this moment and act, and my heart opened up to the possibility of love, whereas before it was knotted up by judgement, anger and suspicion. This little miracle from such an innocuous act was both a stroke of grace and a lesson in humility. I realised that the sewing of the buttons was as transparent as life and Brahman itself!

So dear community, I invite you to sew the buttons of our shirts together! Who knows, we might start with this simple act and end up with

building this city together?! Let this be a conscious act of silence and love in the city aiming towards human unity! And, what the hell, if I am in an expansive mood to start with, I might even offer to swap our shirts for sewing! But please be aware that this will be an occasion for silent bonding, and if at all you feel that the moment is turning into a solemn religious act, I wouldn't mind if miraculously a cup of chai appears beside me to render this momentous act more gracious and natural. And if somehow your existential angst forces you to express yourself, let us chat about the weather and even get into heated debates about it and then laugh at ourselves afterwards!

*"The Love which moves the sun and the other other stars."*

*Last line of the Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri*

*Samrat*

*(First published on Auronet)*



# The land exchange debate

Land exchange is very much in the news at present, with Auroville land being exchanged for privately-owned land in AuroOrchard and mooted as a possibility in places like Forecomers and Pebble Garden. Here are four views on this issue.

**Anton**

I am absolutely for land exchange to consolidate the city. In 1991 I came for Auroville only, not for a Navaville or Ecoville etc. Auroville needs its physical body intact so centre plots are life savers. Some extra Master Plan Greenbelt land is fine as second priority because it was added to protect the nucleus.

My main exceptions for land exchange: Sri Ma as it is our only nearby beach, and a plot on the National Highway 66 side to divert tourists there to the Visitors Center. The other 1100 acres should be exchanged to heal the round Master Plan. The caretakers of the outlying lands can be offered apartments or Greenbelt plots, but they knew from day one that they were on borrowed land/ time.

Regarding the present Auro-Orchard controversy, lands were purchased in the 1970s round AuroOrchard – Promesse by Navajata / SAS because at first Auroville was planned there. When the centre was shifted to the present location because of a new highway those plots lost their function, and are not sacrosanct any more. Navajata/SAS also bought other far flung cheap plots with land exchange as the only logical purpose.

**Toby**

I think Auroville land outside the city and greenbelt area should be exchanged for land inside the city.

There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, Auroville is in the comfortable situation that we have many acres of lands outside the Master Plan.

Secondly, recent history teaches us that to buy lands inside the city-area and the Master Plan as a whole is difficult and, here and there, almost impossible. So, given the fact that, to start with, we need to acquire patta-, temple- and perembok lands for the city, and the Greenbelt following that, if a straight buy is not possible for whatever reason we should use the outside Auroville land-assets for exchange.

Nevertheless, there are outside lands which are valuable for Auroville for a number of reasons, commercial, habitats and/or food-production. Auroville should be careful in giving up these assets because they play an important role for Auroville as a whole. But, if we look how much of these outside lands are actually used or contribute, some improvements are possible, to put it euphemistically. We can easily ask how many acres are actually used for farming, how many residents are living on how many acres of land, or how many contributing commercial activities are using valuable land.

The priority is that the external developments marching into the boundaries of the Master Plan need to be countered. Unconventional means are necessary to consolidate, especially in the (Inner) City lands. We are running out of time.

**Renu**

In the beginning I was totally against land exchange because I felt it broke a certain protection that we had. On a psychic level, the villagers believed that the land is not ours but Mother's, but then we started exchanging Auroville land so that protection broke. Land exchange brought in a lot of speculators and opened a Pandora's Box to all kinds of things.

However, I understand that consolidation of the city area does need to happen and that land can sometimes be exchanged to achieve this, but not at any cost.

Some of the questions that need to be considered before any Auroville land is exchanged include

1) What is its environmental value to Auroville and the bioregion, for example, through its water conservation capacity, or through its capacity to link Auroville lands? 2) Is it an isolated plot subject to encroachment where nobody is willing to live? 3) Does it play a function in maintaining green entrances to Auroville, or how they might be developed in the future? 4) Is it land into which Mother has put her Force through naming it and/or specifying what should happen there, and that stewards have cared for?

In general, these are lands purchased in good faith by people for Mother's experiment of Auroville, so great care must be taken. However, while Mother named Promesse, if I see the development around it now, I would have to weigh up whether or not it might be exchanged.

Thus the evaluation for exchange needs to be rigorous, there are no hard and fast rules, but great sensitivity, study and collective agreement are necessary. Long term thinking is also required because the two circle concepts of the Master Plan would confine us to an island; therefore our entrances are a vital feature. Furthermore, the circular greenbelt has some 600 acres occupied by several villages and temple land, so the so-called lands "outside the Master Plan" may be important in a revised greenbelt plan, considering access, the linking of Auroville land and possible future development. I see these 'outside lands' as the spiraling arms of the galaxy.

All this definitely requires incredible sensitivity. There should also be a very well-defined process overseen by a small group of very trusted people using very rigorous protocols. Our previous Secretary established a very strict process which required an evaluator to evaluate the land to be exchanged, and this needs to be continued. The land group must also give full information to the community, explaining why they are considering a certain land for exchange, and the community must

support this. If the land is isolated, uninhabited, and in danger of encroachment, and if somebody in the community says they will go to live there and use their own resources to protect it, perhaps the land group will need to reconsider.

The whole process has to be conducted in a very calm, sensitive manner, and there needs to be more reverence for the whole thing. Formerly, at the Land Board when new land was acquired, a puja was done on the land with Mother's picture. So in the same manner when Auroville land is exchanged, we could consciously say goodbye to it.

Exchanging Auroville land is not a flippant decision. Auroville shouldn't become a land purchasing and exchange supermarket because the land doesn't belong to us. We are custodians of a project that belongs to humanity as a whole.

**François Cautier**

This policy of land exchange and land selling outside the 'City' area was actually started, not by the Secretary, but by ourselves, more than 30 years ago. It has been a catastrophe: not only we lost control of all the access roads to Auroville, from every corner, north south, west and east (I remember that we used to walk down from Auromodèle to the East Coast Road to catch a bus to Chennai and the lands were all ours), but we are now also strangled, suffocated, throttled from all sides. There are 45 restaurants and shops between Kuilapalayam and Certitude and everywhere around Auroville apartments are coming up, plots, guest houses, hotels, et cetera. It's a mad Gold Rush and it's only the beginning, unless we stop the flow. We need to put a total freeze on all land exchanges and open up the remaining lands that the Mother bought, from the beaches to the other side of the lake.

(This is extracted, with permission, from his *White Paper on a Future Auroville*. For further details contact François at fgautier26@gmail.com)

## The Chariot of Jagannath: Auroville in the making

As a child, growing up in a Hindu household in Odisha, I was always intrigued by the images of Lord Jagannath and his siblings. Like most Hindu households, an entire room was reserved for the gods, and the main icons from Hinduism's rich pantheon of reportedly 330 million gods were prominently displayed and revered. But the pride of place was that of Lord Jagannath and the associated statues of his siblings, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Lord Jagannath holds sway over the entire state of Odisha — the temple rites and rituals, Ratha Yatra (the Chariot festival), Jagannath Janana (the devotional songs related to Lord Jagannath) have infused the daily life and culture over centuries of the Odia people. So much so, that many of the songs in the established repertoire of Jagannath Janana were composed by Salabega, a Muslim devotee of the Lord, and the massive wooden wheels (6-7 feet in diameter) of the chariots used in the annual Rath Yatra are reportedly crafted by Rana Khala (a group of Muslim artisans).

Jagannath, as the name implies, indeed is the "Lord of the Universe," harmoniously uniting the rich cultural diversity that characterises India. The three idols of Jagannath and his siblings are made of sacred daru wood, and the trinity is set on an intricately carved base. The depiction of the Lord, united at the base with his siblings and not with his consorts, and the unusual colours, black, white, and yellow with which the idols are painted, all symbolise the unity of the world and the differently coloured human races. Indeed, the phrase *Vasudev Kutumba* ("the whole world is my family") is strongly associated with the Jagannath tradition.

But why are the idols so crudely depicted — humanoid but lacking specific anthropomorphic features, with stumps for arms and absence of ears, legs and necks? Compared, for instance, to the exquisite dancer poses of Nataraja, beautifully cast in bronze, or intricately carved in stone, Jagannath puts up a poor show, as per the evaluation of my critical adolescent mind. I was aware of theories that suggested the deity's origin stemmed from the early animistic worship of an indigenous tribe, which later, through syncretism, was absorbed into mainstream Hinduism. I was aware of the mythology, which suggested that the idols were unfinished, as the divine carpenter, Viswakarma, against his express wishes, was disturbed in his labour and vanished, leaving his work incomplete. But still a satisfactory explanation for the iconography eluded me till I came across essays from Sri Aurobindo, part of his Bengali writings, which explained the deep symbolism of both the iconography and the significance of the Ratha Yatra, which is regarded as the oldest and largest Hindu chariot festival.

For Sri Aurobindo, Jagannath is a singular symbolic depiction of the Divine in both the attributes of the Form and Formless. Most cultures depict the Divine as a "Form." Sri Aurobindo recognizes the importance of the Divine as a Form, for it allows for a personal relationship of an individual with the Godhead. The many gods



The three colorful chariots that carry the idol of Jagannatha, his sister Subhadra and his brother Balabhadra, at the Ratha Yatra festival, Puri.

and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon depict the infinite attributes of the Divine, allowing individuals to relate to one or more deities according to their nature.. But Sri Aurobindo also emphasizes the fact that the Divine is also Formless — beyond all forms and human concepts — and Integral Yoga seeks to synthesize these two aspects of the Divine, the Form and the Formless. This synthesis of the Form and Formless is captured in the unique iconography of Jagannath.

Moreover, Sri Aurobindo's central thesis is that of an evolving and dynamic reality — an eternal play of the Form and Formless — that works on transforming human consciousness. Such a profound integral understanding of the nature of, and the pathways to, the Divine should guide us in our collective life in Auroville. For me, the Form of Auroville, the "city", was to always be an unfinished project till the promised Supramental transformation of the human species. The city as an ideal "Form" allowed for the praxis, for individuals, united as a collective, to strive towards perfection as they participated in the building of the city. The city, as an ideal, acts as a guiding image that eternally shapes our individual and collective actions.

Contrary to this, the concept of building the city to house 50,000 inhabitants defeats the very purpose of Auroville. A fossilisation of the Form, a merely intellectual conceptualisation of the city, robs humanity of the opportunity to participate in the Becoming — the unfolding of Divinity in the world, in and through the messy processes of an evolving society.

An essay by Sri Aurobindo, titled "The Chariot of Jagannath," is worth reading for its relevance to Auroville, and I share some excerpts here:

*The ideal society is the vehicle of the indwelling Godhead of a human aggregate, the chariot for the journey of Jagannath. Unity, Freedom, Knowledge and Power constitute the four wheels of this chariot.*

*"The society, created by human intellect or by the play of the impure life-impulses of Nature, belongs to a different order: here it is not the chariot of God who directs the destiny of the collectivity, but a masquerading deity who deforms the divine intuition by covering up the God within; it is rather the vehicle of the collective ego. It wanders aimlessly along the path heaped with numerous pleasures, pulled by the immature and incomplete resolutions of the intellect, and the old and new dull urges of the lower nature.*

*The real name of the chariot of Jagannath is not society but commune . . . There have been a number of partial and unsuccessful attempts to establish a commune in a limited field . . . But before long all the defects, imperfections and normal tendencies of society infiltrated into the spiritual commune and brought it down to ordinary society . . . A spiritual commune is by its very nature a field for the play of work and mutuality.*

In the past two years the city and the society of Auroville has changed energetically and physically as a juggernaut, imposed upon us, hurtles down our streets. Change is, of course, the eternal reality. And Auroville, as a society, never was and never will be perfect as long as human consciousness does not change. Sadly, however, the four wheels of the chariot of Jagannath, "Unity, Freedom, Knowledge and Power" feel more unbalanced than before. Auroville as a chariot was always unbalanced. Earlier, we had a lot of freedom and a semblance of unity. Power, as is common in all societies, was unevenly distributed, was often closely linked with individuals' economic power, and there was a constant jousting for power between different groups and, I daresay, even different races.

Today, however, Power is even more centralized and concentrated in the hands of few. If this Power were to be enlightened by Knowledge, then, yes, we would be in the upswing of the evolutionary spiral. But sadly, this is not so, for there is less of Unity and Freedom. In this current phase of Auroville, the spaces for the free "play of work and mutuality" are closing down. Most are left estranged, unable to participate in freedom and joy in the building of Auroville — the city and the society. And without this, certain avenues of individual and collective growth are blocked, with resulting stagnation.

Just as much the Rana Khala community work together in fashioning the wheels of Jagannath's chariot, similarly all Aurovilians need to be involved in the building of Auroville. The terms of their involvement and their lives do not need to be dictated to by power but, yes, guided by the Knowledge. Freedom is the base of the differentiated unity of a gnostic society, and the Power that should govern Auroville should be the enlightened "power of self-knowledge and divine knowledge." "Unity, Freedom, Knowledge, and Power," as Sri Aurobindo says elsewhere, "are our birthrights."

**Bindu**



# 40 Years of Auroville's Village Action

In 2023, Auroville's Village Action Group (AVAG) celebrated 40 years. In this issue of Auroville Today we publish excerpts of the December 2023 newsletter of AVAG, highlighting the transformation AVAG has achieved in the life of women from the surrounding villages.

Four decades ago, in the fertile soil of Auroville, a tiny seed was sown as a humble initiative with a grand vision: to empower communities in the Auroville bioregion for holistic development. From a handful of settlements, AVAG's reach now pulsates across 80 communities, touching the lives of over 5,000 women, 3,000 children, and 1,000 young individuals. As Shivaraman, a youth from Sanjeevinagar, says "AVAG knows how to read the pulse of the communities and respond at the right time for collaborative development". Indeed, AVAG has stood with the communities not only in normal times but also during turbulent periods, like cyclones, tsunamis, and the recent pandemic, to facilitate faster recovery.

AVAG's office is fondly identified as 'a mother's house' by the women's groups, where women are allowed to be on themselves without inhibitions. Their trust helped reduce the annual number of suicides among women from 10 to 0 or 1. "I have been travelling with them for the past 35 years, and they look into the minute details and listen carefully to the voices of the people. As an elder of this area, I am the witness to testify to the impacts of AVAG on the lives of women, and it is

impressive," says the Best Teacher awardee of our area, Seenu Venugopal.

AVAG's work in helping to create women's groups has initiated a remarkable journey of women's empowerment. Starting with a small group of 68 women in 1995, today the 275 women's groups have more than 5,000 members. The umbrella organization called the Udhayam Women's Federation now manages loans worth Rs.130 million, empowering women with financial independence and decision-making power.

AVAG's commitment extends beyond economics. As Anjalai, a 90-year-old woman from Bommayarpalayam says, "Collectively, we weave the tapestry of social integration and equity, fostering understanding and building bridges across communities".

AVAG is now meeting new challenges, such as substance abuse among the youths and mental health issues leading to violence against women and children. But it remains steadfast in its core mission: to serve as a bridge between Auroville and its bioregion and build a more equitable and peaceful future for all.

For more information visit <https://villageaction.in/>



Pongal celebration at the AVAG office

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY AVAG

## Empowering women, transforming communities: AVAG's loan initiative

In the villages around Auroville, where women's lives are penned within the confines of financial constraints and societal norms, a captivating female-centric movement has begun to blossom. Under the leadership of AVAG, women from diverse backgrounds have been empowered by AVAG facilitating their access to low-interest loans through a network of women's federations, women's groups, and bank linkages.

Malini from Kazhuperumpakkam village was the driving force in bringing together 16 women from her neighbourhood to form their own Udhayam Senthuram Women's Club. She came to AVAG asking for a loan of Rs. 635,000 for three club members, for education, housing and business purposes. Much like the others, her own past was marked by financial hardships. "I had borrowed a huge loan from the bank and was not able to pay the monthly installments," she confides. AVAG granted the loan at a low interest of 1.5%, without the need for collateral. Malini emphasises the change it brought to her family dynamic. "Without AVAG's intervention, I'd have been shackled by interest rates as high as 18% compounded monthly, coupled with rigid repayment plans that would have been impossible for us to repay. With AVAG, it became possible for us to not only apply for three loans, but to pay them back due to the flexible repayment system! Now, I'm an active participant in my family's financial discussions, and they trust my ability to safeguard their financial well-being."

Like Malini, many other women led lives confined to their remote villages. In the lush, fertile expanses of Uppuvellore,



AVAG's director Moris addressing a women groups' meeting

where the vibrant cultivation of watermelon and paddy flourish, for someone like Manjula the demand for financial resources takes centre stage, particularly during the crucial agricultural seasons. Additionally, her family had built a temporary shelter for themselves on government land with constant fear and lack of stability. Reluctant and discouraged by her circumstances, she decided to create the Udhayam Bharathamatha Women's Club and take a chance with AVAG.

Manjula explains, "Women come together in groups organised by their locality. Each group comprises up to 20 women. Anyone with the desire to join these groups is welcome." Her group applied for a total loan of Rs.325,000, mainly for education

and family functions, which was sanctioned the day of application. Her women's group operates with a set of rules and regulations, but there's a sense of flexibility too. Loan decisions are made considering the repayment schedule and the track record of timely repayments of previous outstanding loans.

The depth of AVAG's impact is exemplified by the journey of Parmeshwari Murugan from TC Kootroad. "My club, Udhayam Senthuram, was formed back in June 2007. Financially, my family faced significant hardships, struggling to make ends meet with earnings that barely covered the essentials like clothing and food," she says. With AVAG's support, she and seven other members from her group applied for low-interest loans for higher education, house construction of homes, and renovation of shops. She witnessed her dream of a permanent home in her native village becoming a reality. AVAG's holistic approach, which encompasses regular meetings, financial planning and empowerment initiatives, alongside swift loan approvals, served as the bedrock of her transformation. "I received the necessary investment every year, and now I am the proud owner of my own house. I couldn't be happier about it." Parmeshwari, like countless other women, is now living a life unshackled by financial constraints and has even sent her daughter for higher studies.

These stories are not just tales of financial support; they are narratives of knowledge, independence and resilience. AVAG's work is a testament to the transformative power of collective effort where, as these women flourish, their communities thrive as well.

Shevaughn Pimenta

## Flour power

The aroma of freshly baked cakes and the joyous chatter of women learning new skills recently filled the air at AVAG. Over three days, 70 local women from nearby villages participated in an intensive training programme in making millet-based cakes and cookies, organized by *Gelato Factory* in collaboration with AVAG, the Auroville unit *Gastronomica*, and COWE (Centre of Women Entrepreneurship).

This collaboration wasn't just about baking delicious treats but empowering women through knowledge, skills, and opportunity. Renowned bakers from *Gastronomica* shared their expertise, guiding participants through the art of crafting fluffy cakes, delectable cookies, and more. But this programme went beyond mere technique. It delved into the science of food, exploring the nutritional value of different ingredients, especially millets. These ancient grains, packed with protein, fibre, and essential vitamins, became a symbol of health and sustainability throughout the programme.

The participants were eager to learn, not just for themselves, but for their families too. "I am so grateful for this opportunity," said one participant. "I can now bake delicious treats, while choosing ingredients that are good for me and my children."

The programme culminated in a baking competition, showcasing the participants' newfound talents and fierce determination. While competition was in the air, a remarkable spirit of collaboration shone through. One woman, despite not winning herself, generously supported two others who ultimately received prizes, demonstrating the supportive and empowering nature of the programme.

The success of this baking training programme lies in its ability to empower women on multiple levels. It equips them with skills for financial independence, knowledge for a healthy life to make informed choices, and the simple act of sharing knowledge and opportunity.

When asked about the possibility of using this training to start enterprises in the villages, Meena said confidently, "I already have a few orders to make birthday cakes through my father's contact. Tomorrow I need to deliver one". Yes, that is the spirit.

Nadia Akcadurak



## Rewriting stereotypes

A unique race unfolds in Auroville's bioregion. Forget stopwatches and podiums; these victories are measured in triumphant smiles, forged on dusty tracks and etched in defiance of age and societal norms. This is the story of our women's sports community, where victory transcends trophies and medals.

Imagine a field filled with dust swirling around a whirlwind of vibrant colours, not from gentle movements, but from the determined strides of athletes leaving their mark. Instead of flowing sarees, they wear athletic gear, each woman embodying a warrior goddess who is shaping her destiny, their eyes gleaming with unwavering determination and the quiet assurance of empowerment.

This year held special significance. Twice the triumphs echoed, as our women took on the Tamil Nadu Masters Athletic Competition, first in January 2023 and again in December. A total of 46 women, aged 31 to 82, stepped onto the field, ready to conquer. From sprints and walks to discus throws and long jumps, they showcased their unwavering spirit. On the ground, their opponents are women police, sports teachers, and even district, state, and national level champions. Yet, despite limited training, these rural women, all married with children, secured an impressive haul of gold, silver, and bronze medals.

Married women pursuing sports, especially outside the home, is not common. Convincing families to allow them to participate, train, and even travel for competitions was a significant challenge. Yet, they persevered, finding support from families, communities, and within each other. The experience gained in January empowered them to return in December, with 20 women securing 25 additional medals.

Victories take many forms: the camaraderie forged on dusty tracks, the quiet strength found in defying expectations, and the unyielding spirit that refuses to be confined by societal kitchens. They see sports as a bridge to self-empowerment, painting a future where women not only compete but lead the charge. So let's raise a toast to the women of the Auroville Bioregion, who are not just running races, but rewriting narratives. They are the sprinters shattering stereotypes, the long-jumpers defying limitations, and the marathon runners of change, proving that the finish line of their dreams lies not in a distant stadium, but within the boundless potential of their hearts.

Nadia Akcadurak





# Ikebana and Auroville

**V**aleria has been teaching ikebana, the traditional Japanese Art of Flower Arrangement, in Auroville for over twenty years. Why did she, an Italian, study it for many years in Japan and then decide to teach it here? What does she think it can bring to Auroville?

**Auroville Today:** *About one month ago you held a very successful ikebana exhibition in Centre d'Art. You said that putting on this exhibition was very important to you. Why?*

I'm not getting younger and my energy is getting less and less, and since we are facing several problems in Auroville at present I wondered what I could do to help. What could my contribution be? I am not good in meetings, I never speak there, and I don't involve myself in politics. So my idea in putting on this exhibition was to bring some harmony, some beauty to people through nature, which is suffering in Auroville at the moment. Something that could unite people beyond all the problems we are facing now. That's why beauty, harmony, serenity are important.

The language of flowers is a universal language: everybody recognizes their beauty. It's also something more. To accompany my exhibition, I put a quote by Eckhart Tolle which exactly expresses what I feel. He said, "Seeing beauty in a flower could awaken humans, however briefly, to the beauty that is an essential part of their own innermost being, their true nature. The first recognition of beauty was one of the most significant events in the evolution of human consciousness. The feelings of joy and love are intrinsically connected to that recognition. Without our fully realizing it, flowers would become for us an expression in form of that which is most high, most sacred, and ultimately formless within ourselves."

I'm very happy because the response to the exhibition was unbelievable. Some tough Auroville men actually cried, others said that this is the best heartfelt response that could be given in the light of our present problems. Also, schools came. Many students were surprised to see that I was also using pieces of bark and twigs and wood gnawed by termites in the displays; that bark or dead wood could contribute to the beauty of a piece. They had never thought about this before. This is why I told them, "Look for the hidden beauty in things."

**Putting on an exhibition like this must have been a huge logistical challenge.**

It was. I've had three exhibitions in the past, and somebody asked me to do this every year, but I'm not going to do any more exhibitions because it is so challenging. If you are a painter or sculptor, you can prepare your pieces even years ahead, but ikebana arrangements have to be done on the spot, and the wilted flowers have to be changed along with the water etc. Of course, I can do certain preparations in advance by choosing the vases, but sometimes it happened that I ordered ten yellow sunflowers from Pondy and I received ten roses, so I would have to adjust. It was a big challenge for me, but in the end I presented 22 ikebana. In this I had huge help from my husband, Kenji, who contributed some of his woodwork. We deliberately didn't put anything on sale. It was actually our gift to Mother's dream.

**You have been teaching ikebana in Auroville for many years. How did an Italian like you, a qualified psychologist, become interested in this very specialised Japanese art form?**

Many years ago I graduated in psychology in Italy and started doing an internship in a psychiatric hospital. It was very difficult because the conditions for the patients were terrible. I left after one year and decided to take a break.

I met an Italian who wanted to come to India so I spontaneously decided to accompany him. He bought a sailing yacht and we wanted to sail to India but that didn't work out. But in the Red Sea we met my future husband, who was also sailing; he was sailing round the world. After 2 ½ years of sailing in many parts of the world, we met him again in Panama, and from that time Kenji, my Japanese husband, and I have been together.

Finally, we arrived in Japan, by which time I had been living eight years on a boat. After a few years in Japan, by chance I saw an ikebana exhibition, and I immediately fell in love with this art form. I couldn't understand how something as simple as a single flower in a vase could be so beautiful. So immediately I wanted to learn.

At first, I had no idea there were so many schools of ikebana. I entered the Sogetsu school. Afterwards I found out that was not really my preferred school, but I loved my teacher very much so I stayed with that school. The approach is very structured, almost mathematical

— for many years you have to study angles, measurements etc. — but I was very lucky because in Japan the traditional way of teaching is called *minarai*, 'look and learn'. And I could only look and learn because for more than one year I didn't understand a single word my teacher was saying as she was speaking an extremely refined form of Japanese. It was perfect because it didn't go through my brain.

So learning ikebana is very structured to begin with. It's like when you want to write a poem you need to know grammar, but once you've learned that, there is a moment when you become totally free.

Now I am quite free in my ikebana arrangements, as you can see from my recent exhibition, but when I teach students I have four or five textbooks which I follow to a certain extent.

**Was it easy for you, as a Westerner, to be accepted as an ikebana student in Japan?**

My teacher welcomed me one hundred percent. Just recently I phoned her to tell her about the exhibition and as soon as she heard my voice she recognized me. She said she had dreamed of me the previous night and wanted to get in touch with me.

Culturally, though, as a Westerner certain things in Japan were difficult. Even though my father-in-law, who is very traditional, immediately accepted me lovingly in spite of me being a foreigner, I found it difficult to share anything deeply with my Japanese friends. I could easily talk about myself — I never suppressed my Italian part — but they didn't want or couldn't talk about their feelings. However, I respected that.

When I first arrived in Japan, I had been living barefoot on a boat for many years. I felt very free, so the rigidity and lack of flexibility in that culture was extremely challenging for me. However, we lived in Okinawa, which is an island in the southern part of Japan and more easy-going than the mainland, and Japanese society, with its emphasis upon honour, was like the Sicily where I grew up, so I could resonate with certain aspects of it. And then, of course, I discovered ikebana.

**How did you come to teach ikebana in Auroville?**

When my husband and I came to Auroville for the first time 33 years ago, I had been learning ikebana for only three months in Japan. That is nothing, but I already liked it very much. Of course, in Auroville there were few flowers, no flower shops, no vases. I didn't know anything about Mother; we arrived here just by chance. We were on cycles in a little grove of trees and then something very strange happened. I heard an inner voice that told me to come here and teach ikebana.

I turned to Kenji and said 'Why don't we come and live here?' He said, 'What a nice idea'. However, when we returned to Japan and I told my teacher I would go to India and teach ikebana, she thought I was completely crazy. She didn't think the countryside in India was a place where you could teach ikebana, but I loved India very much and this thought stayed inside me.

We didn't return to Auroville immediately. I studied ikebana in Japan for 9½ years — I took diplomas because I wanted to teach — and we only came back to Auroville when our daughter was old enough. A few days after we arrived, I got a phone call from the potter, Michel, who had heard I was an ikebana teacher. He had just received an order for twelve ikebana vases and he asked me what they should look like. That was the beginning. After that, he gave me some vases, and that's how I started my ikebana school in Auroville.

I have always had many Aurovilian students, and some of them have been with me for twenty years or more. This is because ikebana is a never-ending learning process.

But there are challenges to teaching ikebana in Auroville. Compared to Japan, here there is a very poor variety of flowers, and roses, for example, don't last even one day in the heat. In fact, when I arrived back in Auroville, I was sure I wouldn't be able to do ikebana here because the flowers were simply not here. But Mother, of course, said a lot about flowers, so there was a kind of foundation of knowledge here already.

**What is the heart of ikebana?**

The zen monk used to go out in the very early morning to the temple garden with a small cutter and a small bamboo container, and he would take a single flower and a twig, put it in this container and hang it on a wooden pillar in the *tokonoma* (a recessed "holy" space in a Japanese reception room, in which items for artistic appreciation are displayed). This is called ikebana for the tea ceremony, and it all started like that.



Valeria preparing ikebana

The real traditional ikebana, which is the way it was performed by these monks, should bring you into the Here and Now, into a peaceful meditative state, not thinking of the past or the future. This is why some samurai warriors practiced ikebana or the tea ceremony before battle, to purify their hearts and minds so they could fight without fear and be ready to die at any moment.

**But it's a discipline which can benefit everybody.**

Yes. My teacher (who is now 90 years old) learned the real way, which is why her lessons were very concentrated and conducted in silence. In my lessons, it is the same. We don't chat: we are really concentrated, for this is a moment to be with yourself. There is no competition. It is a prayer, it is something between you and the flower and the leaves...

**I was in Japan recently and saw very little ikebana, apart from a large exhibition in Kyoto. Is it dying out?**

Yes, that's the reality. The exhibition you went to was at Ikenobo in the grounds of the Rokkakudo Temple, which has been the home of ikebana since the 15th century, and it happens twice a year. The people you saw there were coming from all over the world. But in Japan itself ikebana is dying out. I met two young Japanese in Auroville who had never seen or even heard of ikebana in Japan, and my teacher's school, where she had taught for more than 50 years, has closed now because there were so few students. To learn real ikebana takes very long and nowadays people in Japan are too busy with work to devote themselves to this. The many schools of Western flower arrangement are popular because they promise quick results.

Before the war, in order to get a good husband a Japanese lady had to learn how to wear a kimono (which can take years!), how to perform the tea ceremony, cooking and ikebana. But the modern Japanese woman is financially independent and often doesn't want to get married or have children so feels no need to learn these things.

That's why teaching ikebana in a traditional way is very important for me; it is keeping something alive. I've been teaching my daughter since she was two years old.

**And your husband? Does he also practice ikebana? His woodwork also requires a huge amount of discipline, so isn't this similar to ikebana?**

(Laughs) My husband likes ikebana very much, but when he took a lesson he kept saying it is so difficult because he had to take care, in a very short time, of so many things, so many different perspectives. It looks easy but it's very difficult. It's completely different from his work, which is also challenging.



Ikebana creation at the exhibition

**Do you ever miss Japan?**

Yes, it is difficult living here sometimes and in Japan there is this refinement, harmony: everything is more or less perfect, especially in a temple or a garden. If I had a lot of money, I would like to spend two to three months a year in Japan, but if I had to choose between India and Japan, I would always choose India because I love this country. Even when I go to Pondicherry, which seems the extreme opposite of Japan, I like it.

It is because there is something else here that I cannot find in Japan or in Italy: this sparkling of life, this vivacity, this joy of living. It's in the eyes of Indian people, even the homeless. Japan does not have so much expression of joy, there are too many rules. That's why, while I love Japan, I want to live in India, and in Auroville more than anywhere else in India.

*From an interview by Alan*

## The views of two of her long-term students

"Practicing Ikebana means grounding myself in the present moment and opening to the unique lines of a branch, the texture of a leaf, the precious hue and shape of a flower. It has given me fresh eyes to look upon the details of the natural world with a sense of wonder."

"Practicing Ikebana is a way of refining the being."



Population review 2023

Last year's review of the population statistics was entitled 'Strange Times' and the piece ended 'awaiting 2023 with great interest.' Statistics can be dull, yet in the last years they have shone an unexpected light on our community. This year's figures indicate that Auroville continues to experience an unusual time.

The bare facts of this year's population changes are that Auroville has grown by 60 people from 3,308 to 3,368 residents. The Indian population continues to rise in both percentage terms and in numerical totals, adding 85, taking them to 1,668, while the international population has decreased by 25 people (following a decline last year of 57). Indian nationals make up 49.5% of our community, ending a remarkably long-term constant of the Indian percentile of the population hovering between 43-44% between 1972 to 2018.

Slower rates of growth

From 2012 (2,269 residents) till 2021 we grew at roughly a hundred people a year and for a few years from 2016-2019 at almost two hundred a year. The last two years, 2021 & 2022 – which include the disruption of Covid lockdowns – we had only respectively 24 and 23 additions to our community. We now appear to be on the journey of returning to the rates of increase we had before.

Passings

This year we had an unusually large number of deaths. In the August *Auroville Today* piece on Death, we quoted Mauna, who for years has compiled our community's obituaries, who pointed out that "half way through 2023, we have already recorded as many deaths (16) as were recorded in each of the two preceding years (17 Aurovilian deaths in 2022 and 15 deaths in 2021)". At the time of writing (mid December) Mauna noted that she now has on her list for this year 37 departed ones, of which 24 were

Auroville residents and 13 ex-Aurovilians or associated parties.

61 nations

The exceptional diversity of countries represented in Auroville grew to 61. After 2022's loss of Iceland we added the Seychelles, Mauritius and Andorra to our international family. Sudan appeared as a brief one-year blip on our charts for 2022 and then disappeared back to its Saharan embrace.

Yoyo-ing nations

Bobbing up and down in recent years, Korea with 51 residents lost 4 members from last year's 55, though the previous year, 2021, they had 52 and the year before that 57. Russia too, increased from 74 in 2019 to 77 a year later, continued up to 81 in 2021, went down to 71 last year and this year was back to 76.

Declines

There are a few declines. Germany has gone down in the last two years from 260 two years ago to 249 last year and this year to 239, though it is still comfortably in third place behind France. America decreased by 10 people in the last year to 107 people. The Netherlands declined from 102 to 98, which was perhaps represented by a family leaving.

Other than these changes, and the notable one of India's growth, there have been only minor changes in the national populations of our community, a loss or gain of one or two people in different countries. Gender continues to be finely balanced: 1,689 women and girls to 1,679 men and boys.

We seem to be emerging from the recent slowing of regular growth. But whether we will return again soon to one hundred additions to our population a year is unclear as yet, and we await next year's population statistics with great interest.

Peter

EXHIBITION

'Soft Self'

Lisa Suchanek's second exhibition at the Centre d'Art, titled *Soft Self: Inner Multiplicity and Gentleness*, unfolds as a captivating blend of art and introspective research. This is a testament to Lisa's evolution as an artist, integrating writings and mixed media paintings to create a nuanced narrative that explores embracing one's vulnerabilities through various inner and spiritual perspectives.

The exhibition beckons visitors into a contemplative space, where figures, textures, colours, and words converge to articulate the paradoxical nature of life. Lisa's artistic endeavour revolves around the delicate theme of holding life with gentleness, which is embodied in each piece. The paintings invite viewers to a sensory experience, encouraging viewers to reflect on their own inner multiplicities and expand their perspectives. The incorporation of various materials and storytelling techniques adds depth to the exhibition, enriching the overall narrative.

In her artist statement, Lisa expresses the core theme of her work – the acknowledgment that, despite life's inevitable challenges and inner defences, it is safe to delve into the forgotten pockets within oneself. The dance between acknowledging what is beyond and taking soft responsibility for the present is portrayed through the art, creating a dialogue between the artist and the observer. Lisa's commitment to creating a nurturing space for oneself and others is palpable, offering a commentary on the complexities of life.

Chandra



PASSINGS

Mani Jayraman



On December 15th, Mani Jayraman left his body at the age of 54.

Mani, as he was known in Auroville, was born in 1969, the year after Auroville was founded. He was part of Auroville's early generation as his mother Poongavanam was one of the first Tamil Aurovilians. Mani was educated partly in Auroville schools, such as attending Auroville's first kindergarten in Aspiration and partly in the French Lycée in Pondicherry. Having an affinity for languages Mani spoke French, English and Tamil fluently. He was a good student and spent a year studying abroad in the US in Los Angeles. He was a remarkable sports person, excelling in basketball, cricket, tennis, kabadi.

In 1996 he married Saroja and they had three children: Surya, Malvi and Deeksha. He went on to give service in various set ups in Auroville Pour Tous, opening and managing for many years

AV Transport Service (later New Creation Transport) and also serving in Auroville's organisational structure. In 2004 when the tsunami hit he had a dedicated role in the relief organisation that followed. In his final years Mani lived a more withdrawn life.

Mani will foremost be remembered as a man with a radiating charming positivity, a good heart, and as a generous and caring friend.

Mani's remains were cremated on December 16th at the Auroville Cremation and Burial ground.

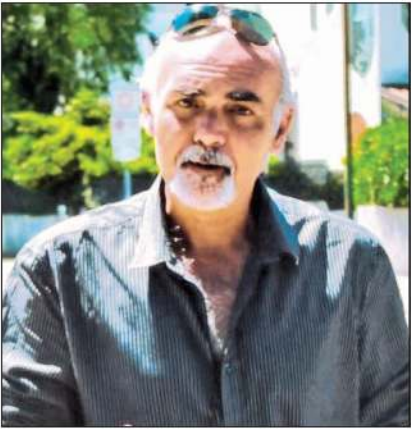
Selvam Nadesan

Selvam Nadesan passed away on December 25th in a hospital in Pondicherry, after suffering health issues.

Selvam, who had joined the community in 2018, was an accomplished carpenter and had been involved in many community services. His remains were buried at the Auroville Burial ground on December 26th.



Giorgio Luciani



Giorgio Luciani from Surrender Community left his body in Italy in the early morning of December 22nd at the age of 65. He had been suffering from cancer.

Giorgio first visited Auroville in 1988. He was working for the Italian company Ecoteco Piscine, building swimming pools. He came back for a visit in 1991, and then came every subsequent winter. In 1995, he and his wife Diana joined Auroville permanently. Giorgio started the Auroville unit EcoTeco Pools in 2003, and continued working in the swimming pool business as a representative of Ecoteco Piscine, addressing the interests of the growing number of affluent young Indians in having their own swimming pool.

		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
1	India	1,415	1,475	1,504	1,583	1,668
2	France	449	456	459	438	439
3	Germany	259	259	260	249	239
4	Italy	170	172	176	172	172
5	USA	105	112	114	117	107
6	Netherlands	105	105	106	102	98
7	Russia	74	77	81	71	76
8	UK	67	68	67	63	65
9	Spain	60	62	64	62	62
10	South Korea	55	57	52	55	51
11	Israel	52	52	50	49	48
12	Belgium	45	46	43	44	43
13	Switzerland	44	41	41	39	38
14	Canada	27	29	26	26	27
15	Sweden	29	28	24	24	23
16	Ukraine	22	22	22	21	20
17	Australia	19	19	19	17	18
18	China	16	16	16	15	15
19	Austria	13	12	12	13	13
20	Japan	14	14	13	14	12
21	Brazil	11	11	12	10	10
22	South Africa	11	13	13	9	10
23	Iran	7	9	9	9	9
24	Argentina	8	9	9	9	8
25	Hungary	9	9	8	8	8
26	Nepal	8	7	6	6	6
27	Mexico	6	6	6	6	6
28	Columbia	4	5	5	5	6
29	Slovenia	6	6	6	6	5
30	Denmark	7	7	4	5	5
31	Chile	2	2	2	5	5
32	Latvia	4	4	4	4	4
33	North Macedonia	4	4	4	4	4
34	Portugal	2	2	2	3	4
35	Kazakhstan	4	4	4	4	3
36	Belarus	4	4	4	3	3
37	Ethiopia	3	3	3	3	3
38	Sri Lanka	3	3	3	3	3
39	Ireland	2	2	2	2	3
40	Tibet	3	3	3	3	2
41	Bulgaria	2	2	2	2	2
42	Finland	2	2	2	2	2
43	Lithuania	2	2	2	2	2
44	Norway	2	2	2	2	2
45	Philippines	2	2	2	2	2
46	Rwanda	2	2	2	2	2
47	Cambodia	0	2	2	2	2
48	Taiwan	2	2	2	2	1
49	Ecuador	2	1	1	1	1
50	Algeria	1	1	1	1	1
51	Czechia	1	1	1	1	1
52	Egypt	1	1	1	1	1
53	Indonesia	1	1	1	1	1
54	Luxembourg	1	1	1	1	1
55	Moldova	1	1	1	1	1
56	Poland	1	1	1	1	1
57	Romania	1	1	1	1	1
58	Croatia	0	1	1	1	1
59	Andorra	0	0	0	0	1
60	Seychelles	0	0	0	0	1
61	Mauritius	0	0	0	0	1
	Sudan	0	0	1	1	0
	Iceland	1	1	1	0	0
	Total	3,172	3,261	3,285	3,308	3,368

Adults	2,658	2,711
Male	1,320	1,348
Female	1,338	1,363
Children	650	657
Male	327	331
Female	323	326
61 nationalities	3,308	3,368



Subscription rate increase

Due to an increase of prices, the subscription rates of Auroville Today have been amended. The new subscription rates for 12 issues are for India print + digital edition Rs 850, other countries print + digital edition Rs 4,000 equivalent, and other countries digital edition only Rs 3,000 equivalent.

AVI USA donation portal

Auroville International USA has included Auroville Today in the list of projects to which one can donate, some of which qualify for an additional donation by AVI USA. Visit <https://give.aviusa.org/page/AVToday> or [aviusa.org/projects](https://aviusa.org/projects) or <https://aviusa.org/?form=AVToday>.

Auro- Orchard land exchange

The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly (RA-WCom) has sent its concerns and a rebuttal of the recent land exchange involving Auro Orchard land to the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council. It pointed out that several inaccurate and wrong statements have been circulated both by the administration of the Auroville Foundation office [see *AVToday # 313 Brief News*] and from the Working Committee supported by the Auroville Foundation (AVF-WCom), such as the sizes of the land to be exchanged, the large financial losses incurred by Auroville, the secrecy of the deal, and the fact, that, notwithstanding assurances given by the AVFO office, a significant portion of the farm has been exchanged, including its main entrance, inner pathways, cultivated fields, orchards, grazing areas, and a primary bore well with a central irrigation system, but also cowsheds, godowns, and an inhabited residence. It requested that all further land exchanges be halted until an immediate investigation into this matter can be carried out, and that this deal is reversed before irreparable damage is done to the farm, to Auroville's physical body, and to its spirit.

Supreme Court order

On December 14, 2023, the Supreme Court of India, in an interim order on the appeal of the Auroville Foundation against the judgement of the National Green Tribunal Southern Bench (NGT) of April 2022 in which, except for the Crown Road, the NGT stayed all constructions in Auroville and directed the Auroville Foundation to prepare a proper township plan and obtain Environmental Clearance for it [see *AVToday #394 of May 2022*] ruled that it was of the prima facie opinion that this direction was outside the jurisdiction of the NGT, and stayed it till further orders.

Ground clearing

Both before and since the Supreme Court stayed the NGT verdict, land clearance, including tree-cutting and transplantation, has taken place across Auroville. The trees to be transplanted were taken to Auroville land near Kalvapraksha; some trees survived the ordeal and show signs of re-growth, though their long term survival is uncertain. Tree cutting and land clearing took place at Shambala and Buddha Garden to make way for the VIP road, close to Anitya (Joy of Impermanence), in the Youth Centre, inside Bliss Forest on private land and in the Service Area (near the post office). Inside the Revelation Sanctuary, fences were removed without warning by JCBs under the order of the Central Public Works Department. Also, the lone 50 year old Matrimandir Neem tree which had been protected by residents over the last few months as a living symbol was cut down on 21st December. Residents arrived on site and created a temporary earth memorial in remembrance of the tree.

Pebble Garden

The AVFO ATDC approval l for Auroyali to take a piece of Pebble Garden land for its workshop has been rescinded by the AVFO ATDC after the feedback period. The Auroyali project would have threatened Pebble Garden, one of the flagship ecological restoration projects of Auroville. However, a substantial part of Pebble garden, which includes a bore well, pumps, water tanks and a storeroom with the electricity distribution box, is now considered for land exchange.

Update from the Forest Group

The Auroville Forest Group circulated a public message to the Auroville community and friends of Auroville about what the group has gone through and its plans for the future. It stated that the ecological integrity of a number of forests in Auroville has been compromised because of the imposition of the Crown Road, leading to forest destruction, watersheds disruption and the disturbance and annihilation of wildlife ranges. As of the first of June 2023, the group lost the forest worker/watch-person budget and all Aurovilian maintenances, equating to the tune of ₹1,87,200 per month, representing 39 Aurovilian forest stewards/caretakers/workers and 62 locally employed forest workers. The Auroville forester maintenances were replaced by "care packages" of ₹ 4,800 in-kind per month. For the locally employed forest workers, the budget cuts represent the loss of their means of livelihood, affecting them and whole families. A gratuity claim is being pursued with the GB FAMC to ensure the local forest workers receive the dues they are owed.

The Forest Group plans to continue to meet and discuss issues which concern all of them, not least to provide a sense of community and mutual support. But it remains to be seen how the situation on the ground evolves. It warned that forests that are not properly supervised will be easily encroached or be used for refuse dumping, while unrestrained tree cutting and overgrazing will increase. Moreover, such forests will be prone to land speculation. Thanking those who have provided support over the last couple of years, the Forest Group reiterated that community support and funds will be needed for the continued maintenance of the forested areas of Auroville. For more information contact [forest-group@auroville.services](mailto:forest-group@auroville.services).

Maintenance cuts

The RA-WCom informed the community that the Funds and Assets Management Committee (GB-FAMC) and the Budget Coordination Committee (GB-BCC) appointed by the Office of the Secretary have recently sent a mail to several residents that their maintenance would be stopped the same day, as the maintenance had not been allocated under an approved City Service budget. There was no consultation, meeting or discussion with those affected. The RA-WCom strongly denounced the abuse of power "which goes against the principles of transparency, unity and collaboration that are at the core of Auroville's ethos". Two weeks afterwards, an email was sent by the GB-BCC to the affected Aurovilians outlining a new policy for stopping financial support. In this policy, the GB-BCC and GB-FAMC state "If the affected persons come by themselves to seek another work opportunity and are ready to try a new work avenue, they will continue to be supported in the subsequent months in their new work assignment. Those who don't approach the GB-BCC after receiving the note of realignment will not be continued with maintenance after one month."

SAIER and Arts Service cuts

At the request of the GB-FAMC and GB-BCC, SAIER have prioritised the maintenance and budget 2024-2025 of all of SAIER's sub-units, which has led to a number of artistic and cultural units and activities having their budgets and maintenances cut. Those affected have been informed that from April 2024 they will no longer receive any financial support from City Services and will instead need to find new sources of funding, such as seeking donations or charging for their services. Some performance artists were told that their maintenances would be cut if they did not commit to performing at Bharat Nivas in 2024. The Bharat Nivas team recently underwent extensive changes and most of the executive and operational teams, including Aurovilians who have been working there for many years, were either dismissed by the AVFO or resigned.

Petition to the Governing Board (GB) and International Advisory Council (IAC)

So far, over 350 concerned Auroville residents have signed a petition to te GB and IAC expressing their profound discontent with the recent actions and policies implemented by the GB-FAMC and their loss of confidence in the GB-FAMC's ability to effectively manage the community's finances and assets. The petitioners also expressed their disagreement that the GB-FAMC and GB-BCC members and the members of other subsidiary groups have not been selected by the community. The petitioners demand the resignation of all members of the GB-FAMC; the immediate cessation of the GB-FAMC 's harmful practices and policy implementation; a full and transparent investigation into the GB-FAMC 's management of community finances and assets; and the establishment of a new, transparent, and accountable body for managing Auroville's finances and assets, with strong community representation and oversight. The petitioners urge the GB and IAC to immediately take steps to address the concerns and implement necessary reforms.

Constitution of the Termination Committee

The RA-WCom informed the community that, as the Hon'ble Madras High Court has recently re-affirmed that the Residents' Assembly (RA) is a statutory body and cannot be restricted in carrying out its functions as per the Auroville Foundation Act, the RA has to constitute the "Termination Committee" (aka the Exit Review Group) as specified in the Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations, 2020. Its responsibilities are to conduct an enquiry upon receiving a report or request from the Working Committee, or from at least sixty residents, that a resident's behaviour is incompatible with Auroville's ideals or the laws of India, or that a resident is not engaged in any community work or meaningful activity relevant to the life and growth of Auroville; and to examine whether the name of a resident should be removed from the register of residents in cases where the resident has not been residing in Auroville for a consecutive period of three years. The RA-WCom has nominated nine well-known and respected residents as members of the Termination Committee and called for feedback. As no feedback was received the RA initiated an emergency Residents' Assembly decision-making process concerning the appointment of these nine nominees. 521 Auroville

residents voted, of which 507 voted in favour of the proposal, which was therefore declared as accepted by the RA.

MM lake task force

The RA WCom has endorsed the creation of a task force to review the design of the Matrimandir lake. In their announcement on 12th December 2023, they stated that "the review of the present design of the lake is being undertaken to prepare a revised concept as an offering to the community of Auroville". The aim of the group is to formulate a proposal for the lake addressing areas of concern, such as the source of water to fill the lake, size of the lake, the movement and re-use of excavated earth. The task force will update the community via a regular bulletin and invite feedback from the community regarding the Matrimandir lake design and implementation. The revised concept will be presented to the community on Auroville's birthday, 28th February 2024.

Annapurna Duck Project



Annapurna Farm, Auroville's largest rice farm, has started integrating ducks into its paddy fields. The ducks reduce the labour of paddy weeding, fertilize the field, control pests by eating insects and snails, and stimulate rice plant growth by moving around the plants throughout the day, and so increase the rice yields. As a by-product Annapurna will start supplying Auroville with duck eggs. The first batch of 222 ducks has proven to work effectively. To take care of the entire six acres of paddy 1200 ducks will be required, for which the farm's infrastructure will need to substantially enhanced.

Auroville's first Tamil Literature Festival

On 16th-17th December, this festival brought together some of the best Tamil writers, educators, thinkers and philosophers, in the categories of poetry, literature, art, culture and the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The chief guest was Thiru Niranjan Bharathi, the great grandson of the poet Subramaniya Bharathi, who explored the special connection of Sri Aurobindo with Bharathi. The Festival was supported by the Ministry of Culture and the Auroville Foundation.

Better birthing conference award

Morning Star is a unit of the Health and Healing Trust, made up of midwives and doulas who support pregnancy, childbirth breastfeeding and provide women's wellness gynaecological care in Auroville. Morning Star's ground-breaking research on fathers' experience of childbirth was recognized at a 'Better Birthing Experience Conference' held in Hyderabad on November 4 and 5, 2023, where they received the runner-up award for original research. This prestigious international conference was organized by the Fernandez Foundation and Hospitals, in association with UNICEF.

Rainfall news

According to Charlie's (Aurogreen) rainfall figures, by late December Auroville had received 147 cms, which is 5% above the average for the past 34 years. While the NE monsoon was 20% deficient, the summer monsoon saw 43% more rain than usual, and the yearly average was also boosted by record rainfalls in March and May.


Death announcements

After many years of devotedly writing much appreciated obituaries of Aurovilians and associates, Mauna announced that she was handing over responsibility for death announcements, obituaries and other such notifications to the Farewell team.

PRISMA around the World

PRISMA, one of the Auroville units that specialises in publishing and distributing books, has increased its international presence. More than twenty PRISMA books are now accessible in about thirty countries, offering readers a choice between digital and print formats on platforms like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, IndieBound, Indigo and more. PRISMA's new publications include *Towards the Sun - The Mother on Egypt - from Akhet-Aten, Egypt to Auroville, India*, a book in which all the material available on the destroyed and buried city of Akhet-Aten ("Horizon of the Aten") has been collected and related to Auroville. Another publication is *The Snub-Nosed Dragon and Other Stories*, the inaugural installment of the upcoming series Mythologies from the Future. PRISMA is also digitizing and contemporarising the long-out-of-print collection of 'Equals One', a magazine that predates the establishment of Auroville, and was dedicated to the ideals of Auroville. For more information contact [prisma@auroville.org](mailto:prisma@auroville.org)

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