

The Spirit of Auroville

The painting

In 1966 Huta, a devotee of The Mother, produced the painting which the Mother named *The Spirit of Auroville*. Huta had a strong connection with Auroville: a letter of hers to the Mother in 1965 inspired the creation of Matrimandir, the Mother's Shrine, and it was to Huta that the Mother first explained her concept for the town-plan of Auroville.

Huta wrote about this painting in her book, *The Spirit of Auroville*.

On 13th March, late at night, I was strongly inspired to do a painting. I felt within me that the Mother had sent her inspiration and vision to me, and I must do something. I got up from my bed and did the painting. But I did not know what it represented, so the next morning I sent it to the Mother, and she wrote: 'My very dear little child Huta, The painting is pretty and the inspiration good. Is it the spirit of Auroville that you wanted to express? When looking at the picture I had this feeling. With all my love.' On a separate piece of paper she wrote: 'The Spirit of Auroville'.

I was amazed, because I did not know anything except that I had followed the inspiration.

In March 1983 the painting was given back to me by my nephew Suresh in a totally ruined condition. Rain-water and mildew had worked havoc with it. I had a terrible shock. The picture remained in my apartment for a month. Then I tried to remove the stains with turpentine. The painting had become so brittle that it broke into shreds. The one surprising thing was that only the tiny face of the "Spirit" had survived the damage. So I cut it out very carefully and put it in a red plastic box and placed



it in my Meditation Room near Sri Aurobindo's photograph. Later the box was placed on the Mother's chair in the Mother's room upstairs in the Ashram main building...

Afterwards I was inspired to do a new painting of *The Spirit of Auroville*. On 9th April 1983 I took a canvas board and held it forth towards the Mother's photograph in my Meditation Room and prayed to her ardently: "O Mother, if the Spirit is still there; let it manifest on this new canvas board." And lo! within two hours, without any preliminary drawing, a picture took shape as if the Spirit were emerging from the board. I had only to follow what was shown to me. The whole work was done in a sweep, not needing the slightest alteration. My hand felt possessed by the Divine Force as it moved. After finishing the painting I offered it to the Mother's photograph. The eyes in the photograph were as if living, laughing, moving, appreciating... This was the Victory of the Mother! The entire work was done in an inexpressible serenity. It was an extraordinary experience for me...

The Spirit which is now manifested in the new picture may be the brilliant destiny of the true Auroville, which will be realised by the Power of the Supreme Lord.

In 1967, The Mother defined the spirit of Auroville:

And the concrete materialization of the spirit of Auroville hasn't taken place yet, it doesn't exist, there isn't in the earth atmosphere a formation of the "spirit of Auroville," which is a spirit... (Mother remains absorbed for a long time)... At bottom it is "The art of building unity out of complexity." Without uniformity, you understand: unity through harmony in complexity, with each thing in its place.... It's very difficult.

The compilation

Mr. R.N. Ravi, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, addressed the Residents' Assembly of the Auroville Foundation on 7th November, 2022 (Auroville Today no.401). Many residents came for the opportunity of a dialogue, hoping to discuss how we could move forward together. However, a space for interaction was not offered and, instead, residents were requested to email their suggestions.

Below is a selection from a recent compilation of these letters to the Chairman and the Governing Board titled 'The Spirit of Auroville'. Whatever one might feel about the content and tone of the Chairman's speech, it was clearly a catalyst for many Aurovilians to express their deepest understanding of Auroville's raison d'être, and how and why this experiment must be allowed to succeed.

Spirituality in Auroville

- As far as our spiritual practices are concerned, for many that I know they are something intimate, something personal. We do not demonstrate them. We do not have any religious stereotyped rituals, nothing visible. Most of us have also an intimate relationship with Mother and /or with Sri Aurobindo.... And it differs in shape and form between us. Even the way we integrate the Matrimandir in our everyday life differs from one person to the other. It cannot be judged if a person goes often enough into the Inner Chamber or too often to the gardens, this would be inappropriate. There are many things happening in Auroville that appear only at a second look. And please know that the whole magic of Auroville is what the physical eyes cannot see. Only when you listen within and when you spend enough time here in silence do you get a subtle perception of some uplifting sacred sensation. This is surely the Mother's presence and most of us are deeply connected to it.
- In your speech to the Auroville community, you stated that spirituality in Auroville was "grossly deficient". According to your analysis, the Auroville Charter asks from Aurovilians to be *bhaktas* and you further emphasised that the freedom of Aurovilians should be that of *sadhaks*. However, as you most probably already know, the two only explicit conditions mentioned by the Mother for becoming an Aurovillian were goodwill and to offer one's work in all sincerity. The Mother had expressly warned her disciples of the dangers that asceticism represents and had insisted on the need for a new spiritual path to be found. This is also what Sri Aurobindo had largely written about when he insisted on the need to create a



Life Divine, on the need to bring consciousness into matter. Auroville is a place for *karma* yoga, and the spiritual progress of Auroville is intrinsically linked to the material and social achievements of this place. The sense of beauty everywhere present in Auroville - whether in buildings, forests, arts and culture, even in people's personal stories - is the best testimony of Auroville's spiritual progress over the years.

- I think what stood out for me most in your address was the expression of a differentiation between the spiritual and the material. I do not see these as being separate in Auroville. ... Sri Aurobindo has not asked of us to explore this deepening of consciousness by retreating to a cave and relinquishing all that is material. "All life is yoga": We practice the yoga in all we do, we attempt to bring consciousness into every action we take.
- I understand human unity as being not ruled by my ego but by the psychic which has no scorn and does not feel distant from anyone. It sees the psychic in others and wants their highest good, therefore it inspires, leads by example, is patient, gives the right advice with goodwill and treats everybody as it treats its own internal parts of the outer nature which are not yet aligned to the Truth. We are all housing plenty of those parts (vital and mental aspects) and although we would like to throw them out, a real unification within ourselves is only happening by a slow infusion of the light, making those aspects understand, reminding them again and again, showing them the beauty of a higher life surrendered to the Supreme (psychicisation).
- The claim that there is no spirituality in Auroville is profoundly erroneous, from my point of view. An oversimplification that does not embrace a yoga of transformation that works to integrate the whole of human nature.
- You have heard or read ideas about Auroville's collective purpose expressed by those who were closest to the Mother at Auroville's commencement, such as Roger Anger and Kireet Joshi. Many of us have also heard these ideas from them, as well as from the Mother herself. The message we

have received through working with them is that the inner development of the human being through dedication to the Divine is the essence and truth of Auroville, necessary in order to realize its destined outer development, and the ideal of human unity.

The nature of the Auroville experiment

- Auroville is essentially a laboratory - an experiment - wherein enough representatives of the positions, approaches, attitudes and modes of action and thought that are current in the present human condition must be presented to the Consciousness which has come to take the lead of evolution... it is meant to become an environment for the birth of a new being, an environment of comprehensive harmony in all fields of human existence, so that the new being may be welcomed upon earth.
- Sri Aurobindo, in response to a question regarding conflicts between ashramites, stressed that it was of paramount importance that there was a great diversity of human natures represented in the laboratory and that the *rajasic* element was necessary and that it was not possible to have only the *sattwic* element. He went so far as to say that if the diversity was not complete and contained all levels of the human spectrum, the experiment might very well fail. Because what Sri Aurobindo and The Mother attempted was not solely to open up a higher consciousness, where the *sattwic* nature more easily can be realised, but sought to prepare the vital and physical consciousness to contain a larger Force and Presence. This is something complex and needs time to mature since the same work needs to be done over and over again to succeed. Auroville is likewise a laboratory of evolution of consciousness whose diversity of human types is the condition for the success of the experiment. It must have the *rajasic* element as well. The whole human spectrum needs to be present. The secret in truly understanding Auroville is to perceive how The Mother's Force is Acting in the community to work on it from inside out...
- Whoever has tried to bring something new, knows how much resistance arises at every step. Slowly we learn that it is not so much the ill-will of our fellow Aurovilians, but forces behind the veil that try to oppose. Auroville being a representative microcosm of the entire world, the living laboratory of human evolution as Mother would say, we seem to have to deal with every possible obstacle before real change can take root. And then, it is Mother's lasting Victory.
- Indeed we are 3000 people with so many differences. This is what Auroville is supposed to be, a laboratory working on

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- finding human unity in diversity. And we (Aurovilians and the outside world) have to integrate that this is what Mother has set up purposefully. And yes, it is difficult to find this unity, to establish consensus; that is why such a laboratory had to be created. And we are trying our best and are indeed making progress. This progress can be labelled as being too slow, granted. Like any positive effort on individual or collective level can always be considered to be insufficient. Then it depends if we want to look at it as a glass being half empty or half full. This choice is up to everyone individually.
- Auroville is not a community of like-minded people gathered for some research in, for instance, some alternative way of life, although discoveries may be made on the way that will be useful for the whole; it is not either a selective “spiritual” endeavor with its own precepts and regulations.



- Its raison d’être and purpose are more profound and crucial; it is meant to become an environment for the birth of a new being, an environment of comprehensive harmony in all fields of human existence, so that the new being may be welcomed upon earth.
- Each of us has a shadow; this being the place of realisation, the Mother warns, the shadow turns even more devastating if not faced; then the collective shadow takes over and destruction ensues. I hope others too will open their heart, showing who we are, so that the journey together may commence anew, in mutual trust and delight. There is no other way but surrender to Mother’s guidelines, offering the shadow too.
 - We do know for a long time here that the way Auroville has been organized in the last few decades didn’t correspond to the ideals we are seeking for...But we are here in uncharted territories and everything needs to be discovered, invented, experimented and, as in any real adventure, mistakes and wanderings are bound to happen and when they come, they always come to teach us something. But truly, we are looking for Something Else. We do not know what, we do not know how and we don’t want to pretend anything but we are all here seeking and aspiring to a New World, despite all our shortcomings.



Not a spiritual society, not a materialist society, as they are both opposite and exclusive to each others, but a third position which has been called Divine Materialism and which much reconcile these two opposite poles of existence into a more complete expression of life and evolution.

Possible ways forward

- Yes, as a community we still have a long way to go to realise Mother’s dream and the ideals for Auroville. Yes, there are certain elements within the community which are not in line with these ideals, yet as a community attempting to realise a divine anarchy, I believe there are forces and divine protections which are dealing with these elements and guiding them towards a reconciliation with the true ideals of Auroville. This requires trust in the process. And these processes need

- time and patience. They cannot be forced or coerced. This is not in the spirit of Auroville.
- Team work is hard at times and it means listening to different opinions, letting go of fixed ideas and adapt to changing circumstances. More than once I had a great idea, but my team did not go for it. Instead of using my authority and pushing my idea through I accepted and adapted. This is for me the only way in Auroville. Power- and ego-trips have no place here. We need to go together as a community however difficult this process be.
 - Auroville wants to be the place of “a youth that never ages”, and unending education is a core component of Auroville’s raison-d’être. It is therefore with great dismay - and symbolically evocative - that we saw that in December 2021, the first target for bulldozing was the international Youth Center. My suggestion and appeal to you, as the Chairman to the Governing Board, is to place again the youth at the centre of Auroville’s development as emphasised by Shri Kireet Joshi, for it is us who will continue to make Auroville grow closer to its aims and ideals - however long the journey may take.
 - I truly believe - it is every day confirmed - that Aurovilians are committed to building Auroville according to its original vision and ideals; and I hope that a fruitful collaboration based on mutual trust can be rebuilt between the Auroville Residents’ Assembly and the Governing Board. Auroville is far from perfect, and the Aurovilians are the first ones to admit it - residents are critical of Auroville’s current limitations and keep looking towards the future. However for the past 54 years, Auroville has been growing every day closer to its true self, and Aurovilians are dedicated to this continued flourishing. I truly hope that the Governing Board will join the residents’ efforts in this endeavour, and contribute to it by restoring the sense of safety, security and stability that has always prevailed within Auroville, and is necessary for the experiment to take place truly and integrally.



- The IAC, the GB and Aurovilians need to wake up to the fact that only 25 % of the master plan’s greenbelt has been bought and that the land prices have skyrocketed or have been bought by private land estate developers. It’s too late to talk about a Master plan unless the Government of Tamil Nadu protects this area, with a novel plan in its entirety and doesn’t let anyone buy any land within this designated area. Land exchange without prior consultation and agreement with the Residents’ Assembly is not at all the solution and will only create more division.
- When the Mother declared that “the true Spirit of Auroville is Collaboration and must be more and more so, true collaboration paves the way to divinity”, she obviously didn’t mean a collaboration which would be imposed by a section of the community upon another, but a spontaneous, genuine and joyful collaboration where each one of us could naturally find its place in the manifestation of Auroville. And that is why if we truly, sincerely, wish to work for our ideals there could be no other way than to, first of all, come to some common ground and a common vision. Today, what is really dividing us is not at all the reluctance of some to live according to the Mother’s vision and go their

own egoistic way (although we do not deny that we have some problems to solve) — no, it is just the way we interpret this vision.

Today, I believe it is urgent that a real debate happens in this community. We cannot afford to go on that way forever, and we do need to come back to our ideals. But this cannot happen in the present climate of fear, threats, and insecurity. Something drastic needs to change. And the very first thing, the only prerequisite would be that there is a general will to become more flexible in order not only to listen to each other but have the courage to challenge or be challenged so that some clarity could emerge at last.



- You asked for solutions for Auroville to ensure that nobody is leading an ordinary life but is constantly reminded to strive for the highest. I think we cannot enforce that by rules or by control. We can only offer opportunities and lead by example. What does not seem conducive for the psychic growth is to live under threat and insecurity by not knowing if the next visa is granted, not knowing if the monthly maintenance will come, not knowing if we will be suspended from our work the next day or maybe homeless by demolition of houses or by construction sites coming up in close vicinity without prior notice.
- I see no possible repair of the present situation unless the residents are given back their rights and responsibilities, in letter and spirit, as specified in the Act. Only the Aurovilians, despite obvious limitations that we know only too well, can realize Mother’s project and vision. It is a matter of transformation and evolution which needs to be given the space and time to mature with Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s grace.
- A large majority of Aurovilians know well that they have not attained the high level of realization that the Mother asked; they are acutely conscious – and more than anyone else from outside – that there are deficiencies in Auroville. But the Mother said that what we are doing here is something that had never been done in the history of humanity: to search and find the spiritual within the most material. So please, Sir, kindly allow us some leeway. It took 1000 years for Bhagiratha to make Ganga descend on earth. Permit we take a few more years for achieving the goals of Auroville.



- Building the city the Earth needs in the spirit of Auroville, manifesting the Galaxy with Mother’s inspiration of pioneering innovation, supple flexibility and practical non-dogmatism, is what we understand as Her guidance for the way ahead.
- We look to our Governing Board for faith and support in this journey of conciliation, synthesis and divine discovery. Please trust us, please protect us; please assure us the necessary freedom and the necessary time for this arduous task of profound transformation, to accomplish this process of a new birth, for a new Earth.

Compailiation by Alan

REFLECTION

Order and emergence

Most people believe that order requires control, and that it cannot result from a lack of control, or even anarchy. Nietzsche considered ‘Apollonian’ order and ‘Dionysian’ disorder polar opposites, and even Einstein, the disruptor of so much received scientific knowledge, could not accept the ‘disorderliness’ of the quantum world, famously exclaiming that ‘God does not play dice with the universe’. However, recent research, particularly in the realms of biology, quantum mechanics and chaos theory, suggest the very opposite: that order can arise spontaneously out of what we term ‘chaos’, and that ‘disorder’, or even the total breakdown of a system, is often necessary for new things to manifest or a higher kind of order to emerge.

In fact, everywhere in nature order seems to emerge out of what we would term disorder. And didn’t Mother herself describe the ideal organization for Auroville as ‘divine anarchy’?

Sri Aurobindo described a form of emergence when, in 1939, he explained how the Ashram had developed.

There has never been, at any time, a mental plan, a fixed programme or an organisation decided beforehand. The whole thing has taken birth, grown and developed as a living being by a movement of consciousness (Chit-tapas) constantly maintained, increased and fortified.

And this, Mother explained later, allows the emergence of something utterly new, utterly unpredictable in terms of what has gone before, yet exactly what is needed at that particular moment.

In the mental movement, there is the consequence of what you’ve done before – it’s not that, it’s the consciousness which CONSTANTLY sees what has to be done... It’s not at all a “formation” whose development you must look after: it’s the consciousness which, every second, follows – follows its own movement. That allows everything! It’s precisely what allows miracles, reversals, and so on – it allows everything. It’s the very opposite of human creations.

It’s a reminder that ‘truth’, as The Mother put it, “is a living, changing thing, which expresses itself every second”, and why our mind-organized attempts at constructing order are often so inadequate.

It’s probably fair to say that most of us haven’t attained this level of identification with the Becoming, and therefore we distrust that we can operate like this. It’s why we feel we need to be in control, to cultivate habits in our personal lives and establish certain parameters, through rules and regulations, in our institutions in order to achieve some degree of order, and why we struggle to preserve our idea of order from others who think differently. It’s also why we sometimes continue to cling to a long established order, even when it has shown itself to be no longer useful (think how long it took for Copernicus’s heliocentric view of our solar system to be accepted).

Yet ‘emergence’ may be more common than we think. Think how often, for example, after hours of pointless talk something emerges in a group discussion which immediately feels ‘right’, but which nobody seems to have originated. Or how, after days

or weeks of beating our brains to come up with a solution to a knotty problem, it suddenly presents itself in all its wholeness, often at the moment when we least expect it. It’s an indication that there is a huge well of knowledge, wisdom, always available to us but which generally we ignore or don’t believe in because we tell ourselves “the world doesn’t work like this”.

Perhaps the early Aurovilians caught the tail of the truth that there is a deeper source of knowledge than that of the mind when they placed so much emphasis upon spontaneity of expression. However, emergence can take different forms – it can also be the sudden eruption of emotionally uncultivated feelings or the play of vital forces – and therefore requires discrimination. But if the products of emergence are often inspiring, innovative and absolutely appropriate for the situation at that particular moment, perhaps it is time we tried – if this is not a contradiction – to encourage the more positive kind to happen more often. It is, perhaps, what Kireet Joshi was referring to in 2003 when he urged the community to find ways, procedures, of helping it understand the will of the Divine at any moment.

This doesn’t mean that we should stop researching a topic as thoroughly as possible, or defending deeply-held values, but at some point it seems to require a radical surrender – of everything we have learned, our presuppositions, our fixed beliefs, above all, of our egos – to a state of ‘deep unknowing’, allied to a faith in a greater guidance, for something else to emerge.

Alan

The Delta programme: aspiring for collective transformation

In amongst Auroville's current governance schism, there are a few initiatives taking place to find a way through to an opening to something higher to unite us all. Heartweaving, in which a small group is participating, has come out of Raghu's work (*AV Today* issue 402). In addition, there are less publicized initiatives such as Breathwork trainings, Partho's retreat as well as dances that are being offered to help the community shift the energy of our current political impasse.

In November Natasha Storey put a call out to the community to see whether people would be interested in taking part in another such initiative, the Delta programme. It evidently touched a nerve because eighty-four people, twelve groups

of seven people, committed themselves to this seven-week programme.

The Delta is one of the the Gene Keys programmes, which refers to itself as 'a path of gentle transformation' to 'develop our humility' based on four values: contemplation, patience, inquiry and gentleness. Given the challenges of Auroville at present, it is clear that these qualities speak to many of us who have the aspiration of changing the prevailing paradigm from within. The Delta is relevantly titled as 'a Game of Collective Transformation' in which seven participants take on seven positions in rotation over seven weeks, with a corresponding text to read, audio to listen to and key inner values and practices to work with. For example, in one of the positions the emphasis is on selflessness of speech, but also awareness of its shadow aspect of seeking recognition for what we are giving. There is a focus on parts of the body – in this example the throat -- and specific suggestions, like to notice dreams and first and last thoughts of the day. The hands-on experience of the



A group in 'Delta' formation



Richard Rudd introduces the programme

Delta programme is one of community, honesty and self-reflection on the course themes, which, aside from selflessness, include harmony, clarity, purification, intuition amongst others. Community is built by the weekly group gathering, and secondly by connecting with one partner who changes every week, so by the end of the course an increased connection is found with all seven in the group by the sharing of their inner journey. Honesty and self reflection arises through the exploring of these topics supported by a group.

There is something in the challenges we are going through at present that has catalysed an inner seeking, and there has been an

understanding that a community crisis does not manifest out of nowhere and that one solution is the inner work of dealing with what comes up. The Gene Keys emphasis on shadow work and contemplation has fitted this need for a quiet reclaiming of our inner path in the midst of the turmoil.

It remains to be seen what the result of the Delta course will be, but the building of a stronger collective fabric, the deepening of inner work, less reactivity, and the acquisition of tools to access higher states will surely have its effects on the community.

Peter

An Invitation to Grace

Natasha Storey is a long term Aurovilian who recently brought the Gene Keys and its Delta programme to Auroville

Auroville Today: How did the Gene Keys come into your life?

Natasha: A personal crisis brought the Gene Keys to me. I was going through a complete change - my entire personal life was being dismantled, my outer world didn't make sense anymore, everything hurt and I was forced to question my identity. It's quite interesting now that Auroville is being dismantled. The whole basis of Gene Keys 'siddhi' / gift lies within the shadow, and spending enough time in contemplation which brings you to realisations which makes the receiving of a crisis very different. Suddenly you can see it as growth or potential, like a seed sprouting out of the earth, as rebirth. Personally, this experience took years and years.

Can you elaborate more on the gift within the shadow?

What struck me most about Gene Keys is the realisation that even when I am evidently in my lowest frequency, a more favourable state of being is not so far away, but embedded within that lower state. I simply have to change my orientation slightly to access that state. It's like Russian dolls which sit within each other, it's really about opening up another door.

Each person has a different opening and the heart is the easiest place to go. That's why in Auroville we are recommended to approach it through the psychic being. We need to have these openings – as we all have walls and masks to unveil what sits in the centre, right there in front of our nose.

What is the basis of the Gene Keys?

Gene Keys is a synthesis of different schools of thought using the i-ching as its base, but including human design and astrology. It also involves the biology of our genetics, and how through the art of contemplation we can effect our own transformation or evolution. The material is beautifully crafted in the language of



Natasha sharing

poetry: that is what actually got me hooked.

There are two main things you learn in Gene Keys. Firstly, the highest frequency sits within the lower frequency, and secondly simply contemplating an idea brings you closer to it. The simplicity of that really struck me.

The Gene Keys is a modern day, 'in life' practice. It's not going to a cave and meditating but the practice happens in community, in family and moreover in challenging states of being. It's so doable, this art of contemplation. You can make it your practice every day, making the possibility for that shift every moment.

At different times we go through different 'openings' in our lives. I had an opening to *Savitri* ten years after I arrived. Initially I was studying it more intellectually but it wasn't really hitting the spot. Ten years later I really opened to *Savitri* and gained a connection with it. In the same way that *Savitri* has a mantric effect even if one doesn't understand it, so Gene Keys has an effect. The words work on your system and there is a certain power in them.

What do you feel the Delta programme offers Auroville right now?

I hope it helps in the integration of different groups in Auroville, as it does within the parts of

our own being. There is nothing political about it. It touches upon how we work collectively with our subtle bodies: it is inner work. It's really a fertile ground for all factions of Auroville to come together. The Delta gives us the ability to turn inward as a collective and no matter how far we are from the Auroville we dream of, all we have to do is dive deep into the planes of our own being.

In our situation right now in Auroville there is a feeling that we must try all avenues to reach what's best for Auroville, but there is no doubt in most of our minds that the real answer will come from a different source, from Grace. This is what motivates me to offer a Delta and the Gene Keys, to make that collective attempt to invoke grace. When we launched on 5th December, eighty-four people invoked The Mother's Grace.

In the initial meeting, seeing Richard Rudd, the founder, and Pia Mark (who runs the Delta programme), it was notable to see how committed they are to supporting us in Auroville.

It's a gift that they gave for free. They are trying to make a change in the world from the inside out. Pia has a Findhorn background, she lived there for almost thirty years, and has

a strong belief that communities around the world will play a significant role in the shift that the earth needs right now. Together Pia and Richard decided they would take the step of gifting communities around the world the Delta programme for free for people already on the path.

They gave this gift to Auroville at a time of a great divide, when our woundedness as a community had never been so apparent and our identity of belonging to a unified whole was being challenged. When the Delta is played in community, it helps us in knowing ourselves as part of a greater whole. In the same way that we feel Findhorn is a sister community, so too is the Gene Keys. The first time I spoke to Richard Rudd, the founder of Gene Keys, he pulled out a picture of Sri Aurobindo that sits on his desk.

You have been at the frontline of some of the recent conflicts, especially in Evergreen and now in the RA Town Development Council. How has that affected you?

Somehow, I found myself in the frontline on many fronts but what's going on in Auroville has affected all of us. Of course, it's taken a toll and demands a certain kind of energy. So I made an extra effort to dig deeper into spaces within myself that nourish me and allow me to face my next day. This includes the capacity to accept what is, the ability to surrender to what is coming, the deep yearning for peace within and without, by calling upon grace. Gene Keys just happens to be one of those tools that I use precisely for that.

In Raghu's presentation in Unity Pavilion to the community you mentioned that you were taking a stand but staying open to all sides.

I do that with everything, it's really an art of trying to be open to what you are called to do. It's not like a stubborn stance of 'I will stand for this no matter what', rather it's a stance of listening, really listening to what is being asked for and trying to follow that, in every moment. There is an art of deep listening, not only to each other but to the situation and what are we being called to do, and this can be different every day.

Interview by Peter

Every performance is unique

Auroville is a place of experimentation where the new can emerge and ‘something else’ can flourish. On January 19 and 20, in CRIPA, 70 children from Auroville schools, including Deepam school for children with disabilities and Auroville outreach schools, performed a one-of-a-kind co-creation titled ‘Every Soul is Unique’. Fakeera, who created and led the experiment, introduced the evening by saying, “It’s not about performance or theatre. You will see a perfect imperfection on stage today. You will love it.”

There were multiple dimensions to appreciate about the evening: uplifting content, inclusive participation and participants, acting and musical skills, and the way each group offering ended with a song, accompanied by talented musicians. The themes were unexpectedly uplifting and real at the same time, focusing on shame in the classroom, love – as communicated through sign language -- gender on the football pitch, inclusion and exclusion, treating people kindly even if their social status is different from yours, health, and the pace of nature. Simple universal truths were expressed through children’s eyes and words: we are unique souls; we are all pretty and ugly; whilst we all can be kind and rude, we are all the same; we don’t need our shame; and we can simply allow everybody to be as they are.

The show was the culmination of a rich journey by the children together with facilitators from various backgrounds. Over the first few months of preparation, the children chose their own groups and explored topics they wanted to present to each other. “The kids were having a lot of fun. Everything and anything was allowed to be created. Nobody was saying this is wrong, good or bad,” Fakeera explained, noting that the children themselves decided on their individual characters and “felt an ownership of their creation.” Fakeera described how “the children started



writing their own stories. We helped them refine their own stories, but they chose everything, which character and how many lines they had.”

Fakeera and the other facilitators observed a range of dynamics as they and the children all worked together. “There was racism, there was ‘I am not good enough’, ‘I don’t think I can do this’, ‘I am better than you’. We crossed a few rivers and the main process was authenticity and ‘Can I say what I am really feeling’? We learnt how to love more, to accept and adjust with different groups.” There was a contagious spirit of acceptance and celebration in the performance that came from this freedom of

being “allowed to forget lines, take help, freeze on stage and feel comfortable with that. That’s the confidence we wanted to build in them.”

As Fakeera had promised, the audience did indeed love the effervescent joy in the performance and walked out with a sense not just of unity, but also of hope, that Auroville is planting the seeds of a new culture in unexpected places.

Peter

To watch the performance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5d5F4z2m57M>

DESIGN

Seeing waste in a new light

Ok Upcycling Studio, located in the Re-Centre building in Auroville, recently opened its doors to an innovative, upcycled lighting design exhibition, ‘Illuminating 2023’. With a focus on designing light, upcycling waste, and exploring value via a silent auction, a collection of over 30 lighting products were showcased. Most of them were hand-made with discarded materials sourced at EcoService.

Ok, the studio founder, recounts that last year, the studio created upcycled light fixtures for the Atmaprasara Centre in Rajapalayam, Tamil Nadu. From that moment, the studio gained more insight on lighting. They trained two interns from Rajapalayam for a future upcycling studio at the Polytechnic Institute (soon they will be opening an upcycling studio there). Ok invited Darren Blum (a product design consultant from the US, currently based in Auroville) to develop and facilitate a lighting design workshop with the interns in November 2022. What started as a small offering to share good design and lighting practices, grew organically, eventually culminating in this exhibition, empowering our ability to *see waste in a new light*.

While the focus was on creating with discarded materials, the fixtures themselves were the material manifestation of a much

greater experience. This collaboration was particularly enriching for the diverse team in terms of learning, growing, elevating the spirit, and coming together as one.

Designing Light

“Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, would be equally accessible to all; the ability to share in the joy it brings would be limited only by the capacities of each one and not by social or financial position.” ~ Auroville dream

During her time living in India, Ok noticed that many households in Auroville and around India do not have shades over the bulbs or tube lights, shining bare light into the surroundings. ‘No bare bulbs’ became a driving mantra in Darren’s conversations as well. Knowing that bare bulbs tire our eyes over time and create a stark atmosphere that can impact productivity, this exhibition wishes to inspire people to *see waste in a new light* - not as waste, but as a raw material for something new, as a bridge between the past that was waste and a future creating a new, useful, and delightful object.

Light is more than the ability to see. Light creates mood, influences our interactions, and drives how we experience our surroundings.

The upcycled lighting products are illuminated by Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs). LEDs are a revolution in sustainability: LEDs consume approximately 10% of the power needed by previous sources, emit very little heat, and last for years.

Upcycling waste

“Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.” ~ Auroville Charter

By definition, to ‘upcycle’ means to recycle or reuse something in a way that increases the original object’s value. In other words, upcycling is taking something old and creating something new. The raw materials of the upcyclist come from that which has been discarded - waste. With a drive to create purposeful objects and reduce waste, these fearless makers save money, abate consumerism, and shrink the carbon footprint of manufacturing

and delivering new products. Influenced by various methods and moods for lighting across cultures, the team wanted to explore uninhibited ways in which more local people can renovate their bare bulb lights, sustainably and affordably, using materials, tools and methods that can be easily replicated.

For ‘Illuminating 2023’, the upcycled light fixtures have been created from discarded home appliances, various plastic-based everyday objects, natural raw materials from wood to metals and newspaper and used coffee capsules.

Value and pricing

“For in this ideal place money would no longer be the sovereign lord; individual worth would have far greater importance than that of material wealth and social standing.” ~ Auroville dream

As the countdown to the exhibition got closer, the studio was buzzing with enthusiasm and energy pushing from concept to completion. The question of how to price the pieces came up, a classic topic for healthy debate amongst creatives! The team created a price list. While designing the product gallery tags and posters, a team member kept having this nagging feeling that perhaps there is a way for us to practice in our little way for money to not be the defining factor for the worth and value of this work!

The team aligned on exploring and experimenting with a silent auction. Our core criteria at this point was to keep the auction simple, provide clear communication around the what, why and how, and establish trust. The silent auction allowed us to make pricing a participatory process with our audience. The silent aspect removed competitive bidding and allowed for an artistic, design-led immersion at the opening reception on January 13th. The outcome from the silent auction has been beyond expectations, and humbling.

We hope that ‘Illuminating 2023’ inspires and encourages people to take on DIY projects, embrace the maker in each one while finding the delight and drama in upcycling waste!

Ok Upcycling Studio

REFLECTION

Stepping out of Time

I am, for the most part, a creature of Time. The days race by with me following the clockwork of the hours that determine when I work, eat, play, and rest. Life, as I am sure many of us have experienced, can be a treadmill.

Till, you somehow hit the pause button, and as the children’s skit proclaimed, “slow down and feel the magic,” “slow down and be the magic.” Ah, the magic. It was the magic that drew me to Auroville. The magic of timelessness. I came to participate in a society where an individual had the space to breathe, to be, to dwell in the vastness of one’s own inner being. Those moments when one steps out from clockwork time, those precious moments when one feels the infinity within the finite, immortality within the confines

of a body doomed to die, freedom, vastness, and a sense of eternal peace. These are the moments that lend grace and dignity to the diurnal ticking of the hours and make life worth living.

I have been in a bystander in the ongoing civil war in Auroville. Yes, like all of us, I have been wracked by emotions, sleepless nights, and wondered when and how it will all end. But as the days pass by, I have started to ponder on not who’s right and who should apologise, to whom and for what, but can humanity come together again to create an environment (whether that be a city or a forest), where the soul can meet its needs—to be touched by the Grace of the infinite—and mould life for its growth?

I did not join Auroville for the petty comforts of my bodily needs. I joined Auroville

to participate in the adventures and discoveries of the inner being. I remember in my early days coming out of a deep meditation (ok concentration, if you like) at the Matrimandir and then walking home in tears, for I could not understand why my inner being could experience so much peace and joy, while my external life in comparison was simply heavy and ugly—a burden that I had to bear. In the decades that followed, a comprehension slowly began to dawn and continues to do so, that the soul’s magic flows into one’s daily activities, but yes, one has to slow down, pause and feel the magic when Infinity steals a moment from the Finite.

Every now and then, with some discerning friends, I have had a conversation along these lines, where we simply share what we have

experienced and what our learnings have been from these experiences. And the view that I currently hold today is that the soul’s growth can be aided by the external environment. Given this understanding, the questions that I now explore are, “What would aid my own inner growth?” and “What sort of an environment would aid seekers from all walks of life and from all corners of the world to participate in the inner and outer discoveries of the soul?” My future and Auroville’s future, I feel are entwined in these questions. And, I know that I have to discover the answers, in the due course of time, through direct experience and not through any mental beliefs.

Bindu

For the love of cheese



I love all of this because I keep learning new things everyday in this job. Even today, for example, I experimented and made Halloumi for the first time. One never gets bored, there is something new to discover every day. We cheese makers are like alchemists...we start with liquid milk, it then becomes a curdled substance, which then turns into malleable rubber to become mozzarella.

I started working in a cheese factory. They all wanted me, because in spite of it being a very laborious work, twice a day, morning and evening from 7-12 without exception, I was full of energy and enthusiastically engaged. Those were tough but wonderful days. There were times when I used to drive a milk truck to collect milk early in the mornings, and along the way I got to see the snow capped mountains being lit up one by one by the first golden-pink rays of the sun.

I ended up working with Fontina cheese for ten years. But the thought always remained that I would go to India to make mozzarella some day. After all, the real reason behind me starting my

whole cheese journey was inspired by India.

In 1996, I quit my job and came to India, with the intention of finding a place to start a cheese factory. I did some research and asked the Chamber of Commerce in Mumbai where the most milk is produced in India. I was told Gujarat, but I was drawn to the South. I had brought everything I needed, some citric acid, starter culture, etc., and landed up in Kerala. Then someone spoke to me about Auroville, saying that they made cheese there. I was familiar with the place because I had already read some Sri Aurobindo.

That is how I found myself in Auroville, at La Ferme, and met Olivier. Together we made the underground cheese seasoning room. Then I convinced Olivier to source milk from the village instead of only using milk produced from his 10 cows, since it's more viable for a cheese factory to produce a bigger quantity.

I went back to Italy and moved to Sardinia, where I had met Monica, and where my three children were eventually born.

During that visit, I started making gorgonzola, again with Olivier, consulting my little book of traditional cheese making methods. Gorgonzola was allegedly an accidental discovery that a cheese maker, about a thousand years ago, stumbled upon by making a mistake in which the cheese got mouldy, in the eponymous town Gorgonzola in Northern Italy. Blue cheese needs holes and air for the mould to grow in it; that is the secret.

During our visit to Auroville the year after, I showed them how to make parmesan.

We finally moved to India in 2008 to start the Auroville adventure. I felt prepared to tackle the challenges that would present themselves in cheese making here. Monica and I both started working at La Ferme. It took three years to obtain the desired results in terms of quality control and the hygiene standards of the milk and facilities.



I only started experimenting with mozzarella in 2010, at home with just ten litres of milk. After all those years of thinking about it the moment had come. A year later, a dear friend of mine from Italy came to help me out. We created a little makeshift cheese lab at home and set up the mozzarella making process.

The real challenge is to source pure quality milk which is undiluted. Diluting milk and wine is a practice that goes back to ancient times, and it is difficult to eradicate. I finally found a good dairy farm to get milk from in southern Pondicherry. I only use buffalo milk. It is much healthier than cow milk and has 7.5% fat compared to the latter's 3.5%. All the buffaloes in the world descend from these Indian ones, even the Italian buffaloes. During the last Ice Age, all other buffaloes except for the Indian ones went extinct, although we've now had them in Italy for more than a thousand years.

What was your vision with the cheese factory?

Before starting this cheese factory, I asked Auroville if there was some farmland where I could keep some buffaloes. One needs at least 40 buffaloes to have a continuous viable milk source. This would yield a minimum of ten litres of milk daily. Anything less than that is just difficult to work with.

We took a lot of time to prepare a detailed business plan, but we were told by various Auroville groups that we first had to complete a course on organic agriculture in order to proceed. Although we already had the competence from our experience in Italy, we went ahead with that, and it took us two years to complete the course. But it feels like we lost a lot of time because that never came to anything: we never got any permission or land we could use. So although we learnt things, different Auroville groups kept making new rules as they went along and the prerequisites kept changing.

The challenge was also that we would have needed 40 acres of land, because for 'free range' one acre is required per buffalo, and it is difficult to find such a big piece of land. I almost went crazy through that long process, but finally I gave up.

An alternative solution presented itself when I received a small inheritance from Italy.

The original plan was to have a farm, a factory, and a shop. That is the best way to do it because you can control the quality of the product from beginning to end. But since that did not work out, we found this place, which at the time was a small keet building that had burned down, and was being rebuilt. So we managed to rent it, although it is not part of Auroville.

I've added a building to it that I built myself with my inheritance, to have a little working space, a kitchen, and a shop.

Sometimes life turns out very unexpectedly; we started from what was supposed to be the end part of the project, the cheese shop. At times I think it is perhaps better that we did not get the farm because even like this we are so overwhelmed with work that there is no way of getting a day off. I come here even on Sundays. There are things that need to be done every day without exception, just to keep the production going, and with a farm on top of that, with animals to take care of, I think it would just be too much to handle.

It is a real challenge to make this work financially viable, because the competition with the big commercial companies is now so intense that even Auroville units buying our products are not willing to pay more for the quality of this artisanal cheese. This is why we started our own kitchen, to be able to sell our products directly, using our own cheese.

Although what drives me was never the money, the rent and electricity need to be paid, and the Auroville maintenances just do not cover such expenses. I even had to build the furniture for the shop myself to save money. The work is endless. It is a struggle almost every month just to pay all the bills. The objective has become to balance our books and not go into debt, which we often are, even though we are not here to make money.

It is also surprisingly difficult to find someone who is dedicated enough to come and really want to learn the craft and help out. The solution would be for someone to help us invest in a mozzarella making machine.

That would change and modernise everything, relieving us of the most time and labour intensive tasks.

I would love to have a place within Auroville so that I would not have to pay rent and electricity to someone on the outside, and worry about maintenance and all of these technical difficulties (at least the assets I've created and improved upon would then remain within Auroville), so that I could just focus on making cheese. But in this way, it has become my integral yoga; it is my discipline twice a day, every day. The business is not viable yet, so we do not have an amma, neither here at the unit, nor at home, so my wife and I do all the work and all the cleaning.

So what keeps you here?

My love for Auroville. That's the reality. But without Monica's support I would never have made it. Although everything seems harder here, it makes it more interesting, and like The Mother said, Auroville could be only here. We are here to work for the divine, the divine within us, and to manifest it.

I am here because somehow I need to be here, to stay here, and I'm useful here. 80% of the mozzarellas I make, I send to PTDC almost at cost price, and that exchange makes me happy. They take the cheese regularly and it makes people happy to be able to eat such fresh mozzarella three times a week. I truly appreciate the few people who do not mind spending just a little more to enjoy this handmade artisanal cheese. Seeing them happy and appreciating the cheese is all the reward I need. I could live just for this.



Even in Italy nowadays you cannot find truly fresh handmade mozzarella, because nobody is as mad and passionate as I am to be making it by hand any more.

I would like the cheese factory to become a service, at least for PTDC, not only just a commercial unit. Because that is in big part the spirit in which we do things, and it is at times frustrating when people see the shop and think it is all only about business.

My dream is to make an Auroville cheese academy, a place where there would be a school and a small farm, to demonstrate every stage of cheese making and to give a full understanding of the process from beginning to end. There, I could teach all the aspects of cheese making. It takes years to learn everything, even just to develop a refined appreciation for this culinary art. The school could be in an open and raised bamboo structure, and that would be like a live museum where one could see every stage of the process. Guided visits would show the entire history of cheese, from ancient techniques to the most modern techniques...

I'm so passionate and motivated by the art of cheese, I would love to offer this to Auroville.

In conversation with Chandra

Brief news

G20 meeting in Auroville

After India assumed the presidency of the G20 during 2023, the Union Government planned to organise around 200 events across India. One of these was an environment-related conference in Puducherry at the end of January, attended by about 50 delegates from India and other G20 countries. Some also visited Auroville on the 31st January, which was locked down to outside visitors for the day.

Meanwhile, the FO FAMC has encouraged Auroville commercial units, restaurants and guest houses to add a G20 logo along with one for the 150th anniversary of Sri Aurobindo when they communicate with their clients.

Governing Board meeting

The 62nd meeting of the Governing Board took place on 27th December in Raj Bhavan, Chennai. It is reported that the agenda and minutes of the meeting have not yet been communicated with the RA Working Committee or the Residents Assembly, as requested.

Visa matters

In her New Year address to the community, the Secretary clarified that out of the 1065 recommendation letters that had been issued, 993 had been issued for the period requested by the applicant. Another 66 had been given for a period of one year, and in two cases it had been done for three months. In about 5-6 months, when the systems are in place, it should be possible to issue visa recommendation letters almost immediately.

Later, the Foundation office announced that from the 23rd January 2023 the recommendation letters for visa extension, registration and letters of recommendation for abroad would be available at the Auroville Residents Service (RS) office, meaning that people would not have to go to the Auroville Foundation office for the letters any more.

Krishna Das in Auroville

There are plans for Krishna Das, the well-known mantra musician, to offer a live chanting event in the Amphitheatre on 12th February to launch the ‘Science and spirituality’ summit.

However, there is concern that the event has been planned without consultation with the Residents Assembly, and that the Amphitheatre is not the correct venue because of the “vital energy that such events bring”. Matthew Andrews of AVIUSA replied that he doesn’t expect a huge crowd of 3,000, and that the Amphitheatre had been chosen after researching other Auroville venues which turned out to be unsuitable.

FO BCC report

In the current financial year, the FO BCC reported we have a deficit of around 50 lakhs per month and our reserves are low. Nevertheless, they had revised all maintenances by 10% from December 2022, while increasing the City Services contribution from Rs 3,470 to Rs 3,800 to partly cover the expenses of the increased monthly budget. They also noted that they are projecting an increase of 30% in the number of senior Aurovilians seeking home-care every year, and are currently facing challenges to cover the costs of the increasing needs.

Concerns about disbursement

The RA selected Working Groups expressed concerns that certain individuals associated with the Office of the Secretary are ‘usurping the role and functions’ of the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) constituted under the Funds and Assets Management Committee selected by the Residents’ Assembly (RA). They write, “Those individuals usurping the legitimately constituted BCC are acting in a careless and harmful manner by removing maintenance support of working group people selected by the RA, are attempting to obtain sensitive information from residents concerning contributions, and funding their own self-appointed groups, without following any previously agreed-upon procedure nor showing any form of accountability.”

Project leaders wanted

The FO FAMC announced that they have identified ten key areas that need dedicated full time project leaders to take them forward under its direct guidance. The FO FAMC invited community members to apply for these new roles

in areas like the green sector; accounts auditing and reporting; BCC and city service; economy, finances and budgeting planning; housing/building service; land resources management; hospitality sector; and health and healing sector.

New housing policy

Regarding housing, the FO FAMC stated that from now on all Aurovilians must work only with the Housing Service for the allocation and use of the residential asset/premises for their own use. No subletting or operating of guest facilities are to be undertaken at any time. Any allocation of housing assets for Newcomers or volunteers will be done solely by the Housing Service. Moreover, any resident going out of station for a period longer than 8 weeks must provide the housing asset to the Housing Service for others’ use via house sitting arrangements facilitated by the Housing Service.

Muyerchi youth housing

Most of the residents of Surrender have written an open letter expressing their concern that youth residents of Muyerchi house in Surrender have been informed by the FO Housing Service to vacate the building by 8th January, due to the claim that renovations are needed. The residents write, “As a community, we would like to make clear that we do not accept or agree with the eviction of the Muyerchi youth for reasons that do not make sense and are unacceptable for not only practical but also ethical and moral reasons... While it is understandable that regular renovations may need to be done for Auroville assets, this does not seem to be the real intention behind evicting the youth from Muyerchi. The building is only 10 years old and it seems it has already had work done recently on it.”

Later the FO Housing Service clarified that the decision to renovate came after it was observed that the building was “unkept ... As observed it was decided to renovate the building including electrical and plumbing”. They also said that “There were concerns raised that Muyerchi residents are not respecting the [HS] guidelines”. The statement ended by saying “once the renovation is completed, [we will] invite [the residents] back on condition to respect the guidelines and agree to the increase of the contribution”.

Checking housing parameters

The FO L’avenir d’Auroville / ATDC reports it is now fully focused on implementing and realising the Galaxy Master Plan. Therefore, “All existing and planned buildings will be checked against the parameters given in the Master Plan. If found to be in violation with these parameters, solutions to bring them in line with the Master Plan will be looked into.”

In this connection, several Aurovilians whose houses (‘red assets’) are located on the planned Radials and Outer Ring Road have received mails from the FO appointed ‘Resettlement Group’ informing them that these buildings may be dismantled in the near future. This despite the National Green Tribunal having ruled that no further work can take place until complete Environmental Clearance and Detailed Development Plans (DDPs) for the future city have been put in place - a ruling that still stands even though the AVFO is appealing it to the Supreme Court.

News and Notes threatened

The News and Notes editors have been publishing reports from both the Foundation Office (FO) supported groups and those selected by the Residents Assembly. Recently, however, reports from the latter groups have not been appearing, and it was reported that a notice has been sent to the editors by FO groups threatening them with legal action if they publish anything from ‘irresponsible people’, i.e. groups selected by the Residents Assembly. In response, the Auroville Council wrote, “We wish to emphasize that the N&N is an independent service for and by the residents of Auroville. Thus no fraction of the community can claim to have control over it or pressurize the editors in favor or against groups.”

One of the editors subsequently explained that the Foundation Office would not allow any further communications from RA appointed groups until the Register of Residents has been completed.



Photo: Marco S

Kalabhumi meeting

Legal matters

The RA Working Committee stated, “It has come to our knowledge that an unknown group of people referring to themselves as ‘AVF Legal’ has been sending threatening communications to residents over the past few weeks”. They added, “Unsigned emails from ‘AVF Legal’ may be ignored since this group does not have any standing or legitimacy whatsoever and have previously refused to identify themselves.”

The RA WC also state that rumours circulating that they have lost legal cases are untrue, and that the FAMC case in the Madras High Court was withdrawn in order to be resubmitted after evaluating all possibilities.

Regarding the appeal by the Foundation Office against the National Green Tribunal judgement, the case was listed in the Supreme Court on Tuesday 17th of January. However, the hearing was adjourned by the Auroville Foundation due to logistical issues. The next hearing is to be taken up in the second week of March.

In connection with the Evergreen/Abri Corner land dispute, the case is scheduled for judgement on 31st January. Meanwhile, the local businessman who is claiming this land has succeeded in getting FIRs filed against 32 individuals, including some Land Board members and other Aurovilians who were keeping a presence on the sites. The RA Working Committee is taking advice from its advocates about what to do.

Survey on restorative process

In October the RA selected groups sought to get a sense of the community’s feelings and thoughts on the topic of starting a restorative process between the Residents’ Assembly (RA), Governing Board (GB), and International Advisory Council (IAC). Now the results of that survey, in which 235 confirmed Aurovilians and Newcomers participated, have been released.

In answer to the question, ‘What things do you think needs to happen before we can come together and talk?’, 63% said they wanted to have trust in whoever facilitated such a process, 60% wanted to be sure that all views would be represented, and 52% said they wanted an individual or group to do something, or stop doing something, before we can come together and talk. Regarding the latter response, 78% cited actions to be taken by either the Secretary, the Office of the Secretary, the Governing Board, the International Advisory Council and /or the groups installed by the Office of the Secretary or Governing Board. These included recognising the Residents Assembly, no more visa problems, and the dismissal of FIRs filed against Aurovilians.

While 15% said that they would be ready to start without any prior conditions being met, the report concluded that “For the large majority of respondents (74%), there are criteria to meet before starting a reconciliation process”.

Aurovilians to Aurovilians

Some participants in the Wednesday meeting in the Tibetan Pavilion have been meeting with members of FO-appointed groups as ‘Aurovilians to Aurovilians’ in an attempt to touch something deeper, beyond the barrier of defensive arguments. They encourage people to continue doing this, both formally and informally.

Kalabhumi meeting and community get together

On Friday 20th January, around 500 residents participated in a meeting which had the intention, as the organizers put it, to co-create a space to review the past year, reflect on the present and revive our collective strength and action, and find practical steps and actions that can be taken now to “walk a few steps in the direction we want to see, while addressing today’s priorities”. Participants were reminded of the scale of Auroville’s achievements over the past 50+ years, and of the huge disruption that the community has experienced over the past twelve months. People were asked what they had learned from this, and how they see the way forward. What was strongly expressed was a refusal to revert to the previous status quo, but to find a new way forward based upon our deepest principles, while resisting everything that attempted to destroy them.

FO working groups open meeting

The FO Working Committee, ATDC and FAMC invited residents to an open meeting on 24th January at Unity Pavilion where they shared a report of their work as well as updates on a number of topics and forthcoming events. One surprise announcement was that apparently 1737 crore rupees (US \$ 213,141,601) has been approved for the development of Auroville, but it was unclear if this had been approved by the Government of India or by the Governing Board.

Multi-disciplinary forum

The Multi-disciplinary forum has begun meeting again. This forum, which evolved out of the Dreamweaving experiment, brings together Auroville experts from different fields to examine topics of collective importance. It aims to create a culture of collaboration across different disciplines, and provide suggestions, recommendations and/or guidelines on specific planning projects or programmes to be included in a larger Auroville planning vision document. The first topic it explored was mobility.

Selection process 2023

The 2023 selection process concluded on 29th January. Two new members were selected for the Auroville Council and four for the Entry Board. Several candidates for FAMC selection dropped out at the last minute, and no new members were selected. The RA TDC and RA WC were not part of the selection process and will continue with their current teams.

Disappointing monsoon

The North East monsoon, which normally brings our heaviest rainfall, fell short this year. According to Charlie’s (Aurogreen) figures, the rainfall in December was almost 40% less than the 33 year average, in November 23% less and in October 4% less. Overall, the NE monsoon rainfall was over 21% less than average. The total rainfall for the year was 123 centimetres, about 12.2% less than average.

Potters’ market

The sixth edition of the Auroville International Potters’ Market was held from January 26th-28th at the Visitors Center. This year, about 40 national and international ceramic artists participated, including a number of Aurovillian potters.

Talking about death

Initially created as a sub-group of Third-Age (under Matram's umbrella), the "Let's Talk About Death" group aims to reach any age of Auroville's population by providing time, space and content to talk freely about death. We have met several times to ponder upon how we want to do this and what platform we want to offer to Auroville. In our research we stumbled upon something called a 'Death Cafe'. What is needed to hold a 'Death Cafe' is a venue, a facilitator and most importantly, cake. We now have it all.

This was the initial announcement in the *News and Notes* and on AuroNet for the first 'Death Cafe' on October 17th 2020. The gathering was held at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture and, as mentioned, it started with cake and coffee. In addition to the six members of the organising team, only thirteen other interested people attended because due to the pandemic the number was restricted. After coffee we moved to the upstairs space, where Valeria had created a beautiful Ikebana flower arrangement in the centre of the circle.

Some questions had been prepared for participants to contemplate to provide structure to the sharing. What was your first experience of death? Could you recall a specific event that completely shifted your perception of death? What would be your death goal?

At the beginning of these sharings we invited the participants to talk from their genuine experience, to avoid dialogues and lectures using quotes of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and allow

a few moments of silence between sharings for the one who shared to feel respectfully and deeply heard, and, of course, to maintain confidentiality.

As death is such a known – yet unknown – phenomena, a lot of stories unfolded. Some related to people's near death experiences, some related to what Sri Aurobindo and Mother had said, but a lot of them were people's deep personal experiences, including near death experiences. Even though initially we noticed some resistance in those who attended these meetings, deeper emotions and stories were definitely shared. In one of the meetings, one person shared about how they feel sad when they see an insect dying and, after a few moments, they expressed how angry they were about the death of a close one. Even though the person died many years ago, this person was still holding on to anger because letting go of that close one was too difficult for them.

Moreover, the process of releasing people's attachments to a loved one who is deceased often tends to bring back memories, and all the sadness resurfaces again.

Overall, the response to this initiative was very positive and over time ten gatherings followed at different venues in Auroville. The organising team met weekly to prepare the events, to share their own feelings and concerns and, yes, there was cake there, too. The initial 'Death Cafe' slogan was changed to 'Let's Talk About Death' (LTAD) and sometimes special topics were tackled, like grief. On the 13th of March 2021, there was a talk by Alok Pandey at Savitri Bhavan on the topic of 'Facing Mental Challenges on the Spiritual Path: Death', followed by a question and answer session. You can watch it at <https://youtu.be/pMdv10fwHs8>

Another exceptional event took place when Aurovilian and external speakers spoke about the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo on the topic of death: Death in the Light of Sri Aurobindo and Mother's teachings. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66ow8ETsrhw>

A session which involved a lot of introspection and inner investigation was an Awareness Through the Body workshop on death with Alok and Rosa at Transition School.

What has been discovered during all these meetings is that there is still hesitation to speak openly and confidently about death and what comes with it. How does one prepare for the end of life? When does one start to think about it? When does one start to talk with relatives or friends about it? How to talk to people



LTAD core group from left: Fakeera, Lisa, Den, Kalsang, Valeria

with terminal illnesses? How to anticipate and prevent suicidal tendencies?

Thankfully, Auroville has numerous therapists in different fields and a large pool of professionals who are handling these topics. In Mahalakshmi Home and Marika's Home we have places for assisted living which can also provide hospice care. Mechthild, Paula and their Health Services team are skilled and dedicated people who help make the transition into another realm as painless, respectful and self-determined as possible. There are even women who trained as *doulas* (usually a person who provides emotional and physical support during pregnancy and childbirth) specialised in death.

At the Farewell Centre, Auroville has a long-term committed team which handles the body of the deceased with love and respect. The atmosphere at the Centre during visiting hours when family and friends can bid goodbye or keep vigil for a deceased is very special and soothing. The last rites at the Auroville Burial and Cremation Ground are meaningful, heartfelt and peaceful.

Those working and serving in this area have also started to collect content related to the topic of death, including articles, books, videos, links to websites, and very soon all these will be made available to the community.

It might also be a good idea to form a group in Auroville which can help with various aspects of death and dying.

Julietta in collaboration with the LTAD group
letstalkaboutdeath@auroville.org.in
quietusauroville@gmail.com



The Farwell Centre

Matriprasad



Matriprasad passed away at the age of 65 in his apartment in Prayatna. His body was found around noon on 26 January; he had earlier informed his colleagues that he felt unwell and wouldn't come to work for a few days. The cremation of his remains took place at the Auroville Cremation grounds in the afternoon of the next day.

Matriprasad (Marco Zaccanti) came to Pondicherry and Auroville for the first time in 1978 with a group of friends from Italy. In the mid-80s he settled in Auroville in the Existence community and was active with forestry work, the Auroville Council and the Entry Board, of which he was presently a member. He was a silent and

persevering presence who will be missed by his friends, colleagues and all those who knew him.

Our condolences go out to his family in Italy and to Ana and her daughters, Jivatma and Amrita, for whom he was a true father figure during his years in Existence. As they put it, "He has been a dearly loved member of our family since our arrival in Auroville and has made our lives brighter with his warmth and affection, his quiet wisdom, and his irrepressible wit, playfulness, and humour. His memory will always remain in our hearts, as will the strength of his faith and commitment to Auroville's ideals."

Christian Edet

On 24 January Christian Edet passed away in his Promesse home at the age of 62.

Born at Noumea, New Caledonia, Christian came at the age of 46 to Auroville in 2006 and was accepted as an Aurovilian in 2007. During the last 15 years he lived in Promesse.

Starting out with working at Matrimandir, he then worked and lived at Sadhana Forest where he was a quiet, hardworking and appreciated member of the community. In his later years he was active as a gardener in Promesse, and instrumental in the cleaning up of the northern side of Promesse, where village waste had been dumped for decades.

Living mostly in his own world and not socialising much, residents mainly remember him from his bicycle rides over the large distances between Promesse, Sadhana Forest, Kuilyapalayam and elsewhere and back, - usually wearing a flower behind his ear.



B V Doshi

The passing away of B V Doshi on 24 January 2023, marks the end of an era for Indian architecture. Aged 95 (1927-2023) he lived a full life and was conferred the second highest civilian award of the Republic of India – Padma Vibhushan – a day after he passed away. In 2018, he also became the first Indian architect to receive the Pritzker Architecture Prize, regarded as the unofficial Nobel Prize for architecture.

I have had the privilege to know him since my student days at school of architecture, CEPT, Ahmedabad, and over the years I have been very fortunate to receive some of his gems of wisdom on life and architecture, especially when he was member of the Governing Board and Chairman of the Auroville Town Development Council from 2010 onwards for a number of years.

Doshi aged like good wine – keeping absolutely fit till almost the last days, sharing his insights on life generously, being always available, curious and ready to meet young people and interact with them. One felt that in fact Doshi internalised while externalising his thoughts! He sought out good critics and enjoyed a good debate. He believed in simplicity, yet was sophisticated; had a child-like curiosity and yet was very pragmatic; he saw the infinite in the finite and the infinite in the finite!

Even the last weeks when he was suffering from kidney failure with strict instructions not to be admitted to any hospital, he was happy to receive students and young architects. Doshi was a consummate story teller and his narratives questioned the mysteries of nature, celebration of life and values that sustain an individual within a community. In fact he once told me that "without a good story there is no good architecture!"

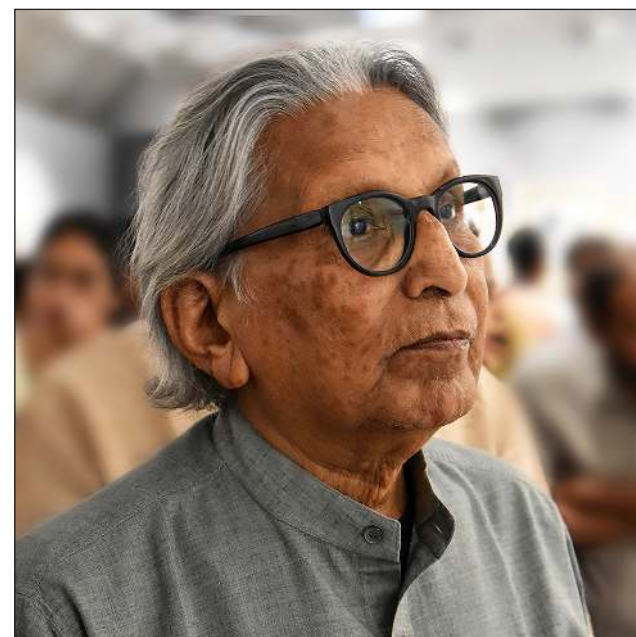
His growing family with grandchildren and great grandchildren, many of who are architects, was a great source of strength and joy for him. Most of all his camaraderie with his wife Kamuben was a special delight to see in the last decades.

He will continue to enrich, baffle and inspire us through his legacy of buildings and writings.

I would like to end this small obituary to an iconic legend with a quote by him:

"Remember, without dark night there can never be sunrise, don't just think only of sunrise and smile or think of only the darkest night and imagine death. They are both a part of you. Accept nature and find the positive and think of it as a journey."

Mona Doctor-Pingel



WasteLess: A vanguard for Sea Change

Since the unit's launch in 2010 with the large-scale Litter Free Auroville Campaign, WasteLess has featured several times in the pages of Auroville Today. In Sept 2012 (Issue 278), they had just developed Garbology, a toolkit to teach solid waste management to school children of all ages. In April 2019 (Issue 357), elements of their kNOW PLASTICS curriculum had been written into Tamil Nadu's government school textbooks. And in Oct 2019 (Issue 363), they themselves reported on the Climate Strike, World Clean Up Day and Plastic Brand audit organised by Auroville youth in collaboration with Auroville units working on waste management and reduction.

Over the years, WasteLess has maintained a steady momentum, building on their own experience and process to formulate more robust and more ambitious means to tackle waste reduction, particularly through fun, accessible, and impactful school-based programmes. Here WasteLess team member Neha writes about the unit's newest curriculum called Sea Change. Focused on microplastics and the latest science of marine plastic pollution, the programme was launched in October 2022 by the Tamil Nadu Minister of Education. Sea Change is supported by the School Education Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, and funded in part by the National Geographic Society.

The published science related to the plastic problem changed quite a lot between 2015 and 2020, and it was clear that the main problem is not plastic bags, straws or baby bottles. It's the fact that huge amounts of plastic end up in our water bodies and over time, because of factors like sunlight, wind, and waves, the plastic breaks into millions of tiny pieces, known as microplastics. Chemicals that end up in the sea stick to these tiny pieces of plastic. In a process called biofouling, sea algae covers the microplastic, and fish cannot tell the difference between microplastic and plankton because they look and smell the same. Small fish eat the microplastic. Big fish eat the small fish, and it goes in a cycle and ends up on our plate. Microplastics are now everywhere on our planet. They've been found in our drinking water, air, fruits, vegetables, blood and even in breast milk.

Doing our homework

By 2018 when WasteLess launched kNOW PLASTICS, an educational programme about unsafe plastic and reducing the use of single-use plastic, we already knew that plastics from inland sources were flowing through rivers and ending up in the ocean. We then discovered that children seemed to respond much more strongly and emotionally to plastic pollution in the ocean compared to plastic pollution on land. This led to us wanting to create an educational programme that focused on marine plastic pollution.

We started by interviewing some of the leading experts in the field of marine plastic pollution. We pored over the latest peer-reviewed scientific publications and conducted a very thorough literature review. Key concepts from interview transcripts and publications were tracked on colour coded post-it notes. "It was Maya's brilliant idea to do a frequency count as part of a conceptual analysis to establish the number of times a word or phrase appeared on the post-its. We also did a relational analysis by examining the relationship between the most common key words from the frequency count," explains (WasteLess co-founder) Chandrah. The frequency count showed that the top keywords were 'microplastic', then 'ingestion', 'biomimicry', 'biomagnification' and 'bioaccumulation'. These results pointed to a unique way of framing and centering the entire Sea Change curriculum around the microplastic cycle.

Co-designing with teachers and students

The next phase of curriculum development is always highly interactive. "The process of co-designed learning is really exciting for us," says (WasteLess co-founder) Ribhu. "With our previous curricula, we were really able to make use of the wonderful diversity we have in Auroville to create innovative educational materials. We liked to sit at the back of the classroom to see which parts of the lessons were working and which weren't working. There was such rich feedback when we pilot tested ideas and wove in student and teacher input. When you do that with four to five schools, you really see trends. Later, when you scale a programme up to, let's say, 5,000 schools, you know that those ideas are likely to translate, even far away from Auroville."

Because this was our first programme specially designed for low-income government school students, we really needed to understand our target group. "We always have these focus group

discussions with students and teachers before we start designing the lesson plans. That's just as important as the content. Just like putting two pieces of velero together, we want to stick new science onto whatever knowledge or experience students aged 10-13 years already have," Chandrah explains.

At the end of 2020, as pandemic lockdown restrictions were easing, we began speaking to teachers. "Dinagar had just started with us, and it was a godsend to have someone who had also grown up in Auroville, whose first language is Tamil and who has a close connection to Tamil culture as well," recalls Ribhu. "We asked the teachers all sorts of things. How did they like to teach? What did students enjoy? What were students' favourite sea animals?"

When it became possible, we had interviews with our target students from coastal and inland communities. Here again we asked what they already knew and felt about plastic pollution, about water bodies, and we asked how these were connected to their day-to-day lives. "Through group discussions, we found that kids already knew about the water cycle from their science classes, and so framing Sea Change as a microplastic cycle made total sense," says Ribhu.

Dinagar sensed that kids who lived inland somehow had an even greater emotional connection to the ocean and water bodies than kids close to the coast. And all the children felt strongly about fresh air and wanting to keep the water clean. Many girls said that they didn't swim, but they loved the sensation of their feet sinking into wet sand at the edge of the water at a beach. "We wanted a way to recreate the emotions and sensations that the children feel in connection to water bodies and the sea, how they connect to these spaces and how they value these spaces. This was inspired by some of our research into decolonising science education, developing learning materials specifically for the global south and a creative Awareness Through the Body workshop with Aloka," says Ribhu.

We took beautiful pictures at the sea and at a lake. In the curriculum, we use these images to tap into an almost universal emotional connection to water. The first lesson starts with what the kids love about these spaces. Then we show pictures with plastics in the water, we talk about how these spaces are being polluted with plastic, and we tie in the science.



Learning about microplastics

Who needs textbooks?

In 2018, WasteLess had been able to integrate aspects of Garbology and kNOW PLASTICS into Tamil Nadu State Syllabus textbooks. These books are rewritten once every ten years and reach millions of students every year. "This would be our dream for Sea Change. We would love to integrate this latest cutting edge science into textbooks," says Chandrah with a sparkle of excitement in her eyes. With this in mind, the team had to ensure that the curriculum was built on a solid scientific foundation and that it was delivered in a way that would remain relevant for years to come.

"Everything we'd designed before, modelled on Auroville or private Indian schools, was dependent on teachers reading four or five pages to prepare before class," says Ribhu. "That's what we wanted to follow with Sea Change. So we pitched an accompanying book for teachers to the National Geographic Society." Dinagar recalls. "We had examples of textbooks in Tamil, some of the best textbooks from other countries, all with different designs." Chandrah continues, "We asked the teachers about font sizes and types, illustrations and pictures, icons, colours, all sorts of technical questions."

But a number of the teachers said they didn't like books and they didn't really prepare for class. "Here we were, designing a book for government school teachers, but they weren't going to read it!" says Ribhu with a big smile. "So we asked them what

they would like, and they said big visuals, not much text, and written in a way that did not need much preparation." Manas was mentoring WasteLess in learning design, and he inspired the team to switch from a book to a learning board. We ended up with a large calendar-like teaching aid which was co-designed with teachers to make sure it was something they would want to use.

"The first version of Sea Change also used quite a lot of Tamil text to explain the science. Students had difficulty understanding this formal written language as they think and speak in colloquial Tamil. Working with senior educators in the State Council of Educational Research and Training, we decided to try putting the written theory into colloquial Tamil, using a humorous WhatsApp style conversation (because that's what the teachers could understand) between a smart student starfish and a wise teacher sea turtle," says Dinagar, who worked through countless translation and proofreading rounds. All of the science is delivered through a playful conversation between these two sea characters rather than the teacher reciting a long monologue. And it is illustrated as a sort of colourful comic strip so that kids can also follow along visually.

The main science for each lesson is again highlighted in short, engaging educational films made in collaboration with independent filmmakers. The student book includes fun activities to do at home. Clearly, as Dinagar notes, "We really wanted to make learning fun and experiential so that the students could engage more creatively and emotionally with the latest science and, of course, have conversations about this at home."

Unleashing innovation in Tamil Nadu

The programme was launched by the Tamil Nadu Education Minister in Trichy in late October. Training sessions have been held in Trichy, Rajapalayam and Auroville for 195 government school teachers, and the curriculum is currently being offered at 200 schools in Trichy, Virudhunagar and Villupuram, benefiting 10,000 students. They are the first students in the world to learn about the microplastic cycle in such a comprehensive curriculum.

Once the students finish the seven-lesson programme, a Sea Change celebration is held in each school. This is inspired by the annual open-house events that WasteLess team members experienced when they attended Auroville schools as children. "This flips the tables. Students become the teachers and educate their teachers, parents and other students with the latest cutting edge science on marine plastic pollution," explains Chandrah.

In tandem with the rollout, WasteLess is conducting a Randomised Control Trial to investigate the impact of Sea Change on student attitude, knowledge, beliefs, and behaviour towards plastic. "Monitoring and evaluation allows us to develop and improve our educational materials and further proves the benefit of scaling these programmes," says Mukta, who leads this part of the project.

A gift for the next generation

WasteLess has just received funding to translate the programme into Hindi to promote it in other states. We are already seeking partnerships within India around the Ganges river basin, home to over 400 million residents. But another 6% of funds (about US\$7,000) is needed to advocate that this science education should reach even wider audiences.

Current plans also include publication of a White Paper on the innovations and impact of this programme. "This will hopefully help us to form partnerships with NGOs and governments, and eventually help with textbook integration," says Chandrah.

"The funding partnership with the National Geographic Society has been a dream. They are so dedicated to science and exploration that helps to illuminate and protect the wonders of the world. They have been such a massive support to make this dream a reality," continues Ribhu. He hopes to leverage their powerful network to help scale this curriculum as widely as possible as microplastic pollution is a global challenge that needs to be addressed on a global scale.

"This is our very best work. It feels like a gift from Auroville to the world," says Ribhu, the beautifully crafted materials spread out on the table in front of him.

The young Auroville team is fully dedicated to bridging the gap between the latest science and how a child sees the world and interacts with it. We are convinced that children-powered educational programmes can pave the path for a wasteless world. "Imagine a world where waste no longer exists. An inexhaustible world that is incapable of being used up," says Chandrah, with passion and hope in her voice.

Neha

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