

Almost 37 years ago, on a rainy day in November, 1988, the first issue of *Auroville Today* was published. The main theme was the Auroville Foundation Act, which had just been passed by the Government of India. Since then, in over 434 issues we have published thousands of articles on every aspect of Auroville.

The intention, as our somewhat prosaic title suggests, was not to preach what should be here and not to erect a false image, but to present the actual Auroville as it exists in all its diversity – the successes, the failures, the aspirations, the shadows – because we believed that it is important to document every aspect of this unique undertaking for the benefit of the residents and for the wider world.

Since the new administration took office in 2021, however, it has become increasingly difficult for us to do this. This is mainly because, while we have reported extensively on the many initiatives of the new administration and their impacts upon residents, almost without exception officials of the new administration and Aurovilians who have allied themselves with it have refused to explain to us their point of view and why they are taking the actions which they are taking, in spite of many requests for interviews.

Inevitably, this has given our coverage of recent events a somewhat lop-sided feel, which, ironically, has been used by some allied with the present administration to justify their refusal to engage with us. We believe that a free press which honestly tries to document what is happening on the ground and allows a range of opinions to be expressed about this is an essential element of every healthy society, and especially for one like Auroville which aspires to be an experiment in human unity and consciousness change. In carrying out this mission we have always tried to live up to the principles laid out in the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists.

However, recently there have been several worrying developments.

A member of one of the groups appointed by the present administration apparently has said that they intend to 'go after' *Auroville Today*, and, recently, one of our editors received an email from a member of another group in which she rejected the request for an interview on current town planning because, she said, *Auroville Today* had published misleading comments on current affairs in Auroville, as well as material from working groups which had not been constituted or supported by the current Governing Board. She advised him to refer to *Auroville Tomorrow*, a publication of the present administration, or to official announcements of L'Avenir d'Auroville for all information relating to the real and ongoing progress of Auroville.

This is the first and only time in the 37 years of *Auroville Today's* existence that an individual or group, including past and present Governing Boards and International Advisory Committees, has told us what we can and cannot publish. Until now, even if individuals or the authorities were not always happy with our coverage – which is inevitable in a place like Auroville – they trusted that we were working with goodwill and for the greater good of the community, and that we would not publish anything which we felt would be detrimental to this.

The threat to close us down and the instruction concerning what we should and should not publish appears to be an attempt to establish only one narrative about what is happening in today's Auroville. But we believe that Auroville is too complex, too 'creatively messy', to be shoehorned into only one narrative. Therefore, for as long as we are able to continue, we will attempt to report on and celebrate the astonishing diversity of this place.

Editors

Powering Auroville's electric mobility movement

From clunky prototypes to a thriving EV ecosystem, Auroville's journey mirrors India's evolving electric vehicle landscape – driven by innovation, resilience, and a vision for sustainable transport.



E-bicycles for rent at Kinisi

“There is a massive change going on,” says Debo, reflecting on India's electric vehicle (EV) market. “The Indian government is serious about promoting sustainable transportation, reducing automotive pollution, and encouraging electric mobility. That has led to a surge in EV manufacturers – from bicycles and scooters to motorbikes and cars. India still trails behind China, the global EV leader, but it's catching up fast.”

Debo is the executive of Kinisi, Auroville's electric mobility unit, which provides electric transport solutions to Aurovilians, newcomers, volunteers and guests. Kinisi is the successor of Qutee by Chandresh and EV Future, a small Auroville unit pioneered by Akash and Sukrit, who in 2008, launched Auroville's first indigenously built electric motorbike called ‘the Humvee’. The name was inspired by the American Hummer for its clunky appearance and all-terrain capability. “It was a heavy bike, capable of 40-50 km/h, with an advanced electronic battery monitoring system,” Debo recalls. “But high manufacturing costs and battery issues led to the discontinuation of the project in 2011, after production of about 40 units.”

Rethinking urban mobility

It took five more years before Kinisi saw the light of day. In 2016, concerned about the ever-increasing number of petrol motorbikes that plied the roads of Auroville, Debo and his team researched what transportation requirements the Aurovilians truly had. “We went to the Solar Kitchen and interviewed people in the age group of 18-80. We discovered that, on average, they travel 6.6 km per day. That's a really small number and we wondered, why don't they cycle or walk? We also did a lifecycle analysis to understand the carbon impact of each mode of transportation and found – not amazingly – that walking and cycling are the best mode of transport we can have in Auroville.”

But when they asked people why they didn't walk or cycle, the answers were telling – it was too hot, too humid, and they didn't want to arrive drenched in sweat. Asked about electric vehicles, many cited high costs. But when the idea of pedal-assisted e-bicycles was proposed, the response was overwhelmingly positive. “That sparked the idea: let's build our own electric bicycles.”

The long road ahead

In 2016, India's two major bicycle manufacturers – Hero Cycles and TI Cycles – were approached with Kinisi's requirement of an electric bicycle for micro-mobility of eight to ten kilometres a day. They replied that it would take a lot of time to design, probably about six years. “That was in 2016, and our aim was to supply 50 electric bicycles to Auroville on Auroville's 50th anniversary in February 2018.”

Dismayed, Debo decided to try his luck in Ludhiana, the ‘bicycle capital of India’. He

visited factory after factory, but everywhere got a polite but decisive ‘no’. One gentleman even told him to go to China to get what he needed. He returned to Delhi to meet a friend and leave for Auroville the next day. But fate had other plans.

“My friend's mother knew the owner of Hero and phoned him. He organised a meeting for me with his CEO the next morning in the head office of Hero Cycles. But the CEO was very busy. I waited and waited, the hours passed, I drank coffee after coffee, and then, at the end of the afternoon, I met him. Hearing what I wanted, he dismissed my request, saying that ‘e-cycles don't work in India’. On the point of leaving, he asked me where I was from. ‘From Auroville, from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, where I studied,’ I replied. Then he turned back and said that he had studied the works of Sri Aurobindo in his youth. ‘Tell me more about that place’. So I told him about Auroville and he was very interested. Responding to my aspiration of getting 50 electric cycles for Auroville's 50th birthday, he replied that Hero did export some electric cycles to Europe and that he would send me a sample. On my return, I met a well-wisher of Auroville and he promised to fund the 50 e-cycles for Auroville's 50th birthday.” Debo returned to Auroville very excited.

The Shanghai cycle expo

But the months passed and nothing happened. Then he learned from Sukrit (Aurovelo) that a big cycle expo would happen in Shanghai and decided to go to China.

The experience was overwhelming. “There were five huge exhibition halls; I only managed to visit three of them, walking at least 20 km each day and seeing every possible technology – batteries, motors, controllers, brakes and frames”. But it soon became clear that he was at the wrong door in trying to interest big manufacturers.

“They wouldn't ask how many cycles we wanted; they talked about how many containers we needed. 50 cycles? That was laughable.”

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Kinisi services all e-scooters and e-motorbikes

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“But there was one man attending a small booth. He sold very beautiful cycles and was happy to supply us with only 50 cycles. Not only that, but he was willing to customise and assemble them in whatever way we wanted, and send them to India. I returned to Auroville elated, telling my colleagues that I’d found the supplier who was willing to send whatever we wanted. With the help of our Chinese Aurovilian, Lijun, I had a few Skype calls with him. Then we were ready to place the order.”



The Humvee

Blockages

At that time, several things happened. The first was that Hero sent the promised sample electric cycle. Then, the Indian Government introduced the new Goods and Services Tax (GST) and Kinisi’s import-export license got cancelled, so Debo had to apply for a new one. Debo’s visits to the Chennai Port Authorities were to no avail: without license, no import. Also, there was now a substantial amount of duties and GST to be paid on imported cycles. He phoned the Chinese manufacturer and told him that he couldn’t place the order.

Then they had a good look at the bicycle which Hero had so generously sent. It was a simple model. Thanks to the China visit, Debo now knew exactly what model was needed for Auroville: thicker tires, a better motor, a high-quality battery, sturdy brakes and a simple LED display. Hero obliged. They could not develop a new frame for only 50 bicycles, but they were able to supply all the other requirements because they had all the necessary supply chains in place. And with the support of Hero, Kinisi finally managed to offer 50 pedal-assisted electric bicycles to Auroville on its 50th birthday in February 2018.

Finding a local solution

The experience showed that manufacturing e-bicycles in Auroville would not be a feasible approach. Instead, Kinisi started focusing on assembling them. “Once we got our import-export code, we imported a hundred bicycle frames and other parts from China and put it all together here in Auroville. But then COVID came; the costs of importing bicycle parts escalated, making import no longer economically feasible.” Kinisi then focused on Indian manufacturers. “Many small startups had come up; over the years we have contacted all of them. We now specify our needs, and whoever gives us the solution, we’ll take from them. We leave it to the supplier to import any parts they need to meet our requirements.”

A thriving EV-ecosystem

Today, Kinisi’s fleet includes various models of pedal-assisted e-bicycles, throttle e-bicycles for seniors, and e-tri wheel scooters for people with special needs – all capped at 25 km/h. They’re available for rent to guests and volunteers. Kinisi also provides hassle-free e-cycle stewardship to Aurovilians and newcomers at discounted rates under the KIM scheme (Kinisi In-kind Mobility). More than 300 residents use Kinisi e-bicycles by making a monthly contribution in a range of ₹1,000 to ₹1,475 per month depending on the model (inclusive of GST, periodical service, repairs, and battery replacement). Guests contribute more but still save significantly compared to taxis or rickshaws. “We found that guests spend ₹800 - ₹1,200 daily on transport. Renting an e-bicycle for a fraction of that expenditure is far cheaper – and greener.”

Kinisi also sells e-bicycles – to residents who don’t join the KIM scheme – and has



February 2017: Kinisi founders meeting. From left: Matthias, Mariyse, Rajan and Debo



Debo testing Kinisi’s first handmade step through e-bicycle

converted over 50 regular bicycles to electric. In total, nearly 670 e-bicycles ride the roads of Auroville today. The concept is catching on: the Auroville units Auroville Consulting, Dropzy, Matrimandir, Shradhanjali and Yuvabe (to name a few) now rent e-bicycles from Kinisi, for use by their team members as part of their benefits package.

As India’s EV market has grown, so has Kinisi’s scope and it now includes e-scooters and e-motorbikes. It owns a small fleet of e-scooters for renting, and it helps residents purchase an e-scooter or e-motorbike of their choice, regardless of brand. “We assist and service all EVs.”

Debo’s preference remains promoting e-bicycles, not just for their environmental benefits but also for their social ones. “Cycling slows you down. You meet people. You smile. That doesn’t happen in a car or on a motorcycle. And cycling is good for your health.”

A return to the vision

Could Auroville truly become a fully EV-based community? Debo strongly believes it is not only possible but necessary. “The Auroville Master Plan already

provides a clear framework. It envisages transition areas at the entrances, where Auroville residents, employees and guests will park their fossil fuel vehicles and transition to community provided electric buses or e-carts to get to their destination inside Auroville. That would set an example for sustainable urban living in India. If we remain aligned with this plan, we can phase-out petrol and diesel vehicles entirely.”

This conforms to the concerns of Auroville’s chief architect Roger Anger about traffic in Auroville. As early as 1965, even before the township was inaugurated, he had written to The Mother about the excessive number of cars in modern cities and suggested replacing them by another mode of transport within Auroville. Mother replied with a clear solution: “*Small size electrically powered vehicles, capable of transporting about 200 kg at a speed of 15 km/h.*”

Says Debo: “Choosing EVs over fossil fuel alternatives is not just a technological solution, it is a commitment to The Mother’s vision. Auroville has the potential to become a fully EV-based community but it requires a strong, collective determination.”

It is a potential Kinisi is slowly bringing to fruition.

In conversation with Carel

REFLECTION

The virtue of integrity in times of crisis: lessons from Auroville’s crucible

“What to make of French writers, who, to stay on the right side of the occupation authorities, decide to write about anything but the one thing all French people are thinking about, or worse still, who, out of cowardice, bolster the occupants’ plan to make it appear as though everything in France continues as it did before?”

Jean Guéhenno’s anguish, recorded in his wartime journal as he witnessed the intellectual collaboration with Nazi-occupied France, resonates across decades and continents. Today, in the experimental township of Auroville in southern India, a different but disturbingly familiar dynamic unfolds. While the apparent stakes are incomparably lower than those faced by Guéhenno’s contemporaries, the essential moral challenge remains unchanged: when institutions are overtaken by authoritarian forces, what do good people do?

The Mother was explicit about the necessity of freedom, aspiration and sincerity in this experiment: “There should be somewhere on earth a place which no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings of goodwill who have a sincere aspiration could live freely as citizens of the world.” The key phrase – “sincere aspiration” – points directly to integrity as the community’s essential qualification. Not wealth, not nationality, not even spiritual attainment, but the honest pursuit of truth.

This founding vision makes Auroville’s current crisis particularly tragic. The community was designed as a space where integrity could flourish, where the usual pressures to compromise one’s deepest values for security or advancement would be minimized. The Auroville Charter, written by the Mother, promised “a place of unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages” – but such growth requires the freedom to experiment, to question, to sometimes fail while remaining true to the highest aspirations.

The spiritual dimension: Integrity as yoga

Sri Aurobindo’s concept of integral yoga recognizes that genuine spiritual development cannot be separated from truthful

engagement with outer circumstances. While no external pressure can compromise one’s essential connection to the Divine or prevent authentic spiritual development, the current crisis creates conditions where the natural expression of inner truth becomes dangerous. This forces a painful disconnect between inner conviction and outer action – precisely the schism that integral yoga seeks to heal, not perpetuate. The tragedy is not that spiritual work becomes impossible, but that the conditions for its natural flowering into truthful action are systematically destroyed.

The current crisis has forced many residents to confront fundamental questions about the relationship between spiritual aspiration and worldly engagement. Can one pursue authentic spiritual development while remaining silent about policies one believes harmful? When institutional structures themselves become obstacles to truth and justice, the question becomes not whether to engage, but how to engage in ways that serve rather than compromise spiritual development.

Different residents have answered these questions differently, often causing painful divisions among people who share deep spiritual commitments. Some argue that resistance to authority represents ego-driven attachment that spiritual seekers should transcend. Others contend that integrity requires taking stands even when doing so disrupts superficial harmony.

Sri Aurobindo’s writings suggest that this latter view aligns more closely with integral development. In his vision of a spiritualized society, he demonstrated how spiritual realization should transform rather than abandon material existence. This suggests that withdrawal from difficult situations represents a form of spiritual escapism – what some call ‘bypassing’ – that uses detachment as an excuse to sidestep necessary moral engagement.

Yet the institutional dimension adds complexity absent from individual spiritual practice, especially when the community itself becomes the source of pressure to compromise the expression of inner truth. This had led some residents to leave Auroville entirely, others to retreat into private practice, and still others to engage more deeply in collective resistance.

The path forward: Reclaiming the experiment

For Auroville, reclaiming its essential character will require not just policy changes but the restoration of conditions where integrity can flourish. This reconstruction must address multiple dimensions simultaneously.

Institutionally, the community needs governance structures that reward rather than punish truth-telling.

Perhaps most importantly, the community must rebuild trust through sustained commitment to and practice of authentic dialogue. This will require acknowledging that good people have made different choices under pressure, that some who accommodated did so from legitimate fears rather than opportunism, and that healing will require understanding rather than judgment.

Yet the deepest reconstruction must be spiritual. The Mother’s vision of Auroville as a space for human development beyond conventional limitations requires citizens capable of integrity even under pressure. This capacity cannot be mandated through rules or structures; it must emerge from renewed commitment to the values that make such a community worthwhile.

This reconstruction offers opportunities that extend beyond Auroville itself. As democratic institutions face pressure worldwide, experiments in maintaining authentic community values under authoritarian stress provide crucial learning for other contexts. Auroville’s struggle to preserve its essential character while engaging constructively with Indian government authority offers insights relevant to civil society organizations globally.

Auro Innominata Collective

[extracted from a longer article]

The Auro Innominata Collective were introduced in a recent News & Notes as “scholars, observers, and witnesses – shaped by rigorous academic inquiry and blessed with the perspective that distance can provide. Our education has offered us tools to read the patterns of history; our connection to Auroville has helped us glimpse what lies beyond them.”

Learnings from the front line and beyond

Maël Vidal was born and grew up in Auroville before going to France to pursue higher studies, where he received a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in social anthropology. After some back and forths, he returned in 2021 and was a member of the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly from 2022 – 2025. Here he talks about the experience of these last years spent in the Working Committee and what he would like to do now.

Auroville Today: What is your present situation?

Maël: I am in the south-east of France where I just moved in with my girlfriend, so a new chapter in my life is opening up. After two exhausting years of working for Auroville from a distance, my term in the Working Committee (WCom) ended not long ago and now I am trying to move on with my life. Among other things, this means finding a job in Europe.

Was your decision to leave Auroville voluntary?

No. When I returned from France after the long Covid period in 2021, my long-term plan was to build my life in Auroville. So, in 2023 when I received a Leave India notice from the Indian Government because my visa recommendation was not granted by the Secretary, it was a huge shock. I was born here, my roots are here, and I always looked on this place as my home.

It seems that the Leave Notice was in some way connected with your membership in the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly. How did it come about that you joined the Working Committee?

I landed back in Auroville on 4 December 2021, which was just before the bulldozers were sent to demolish the Youth Centre and its surrounding forest. Even if at that point I was only planning to come for a few months, I felt it was a special moment in Auroville's history and that something was calling me to stay. I had a sense that this could be the first step in a total takeover of Auroville, and I wanted to help avoid this the best I could. I saw forces at play that I could personally not align with because I thought, and still think, they were antithetical to what Auroville represents.

So very quickly I started engaging with the situation on the ground, and taking on more and more commitments in the service of Auroville's values. I really felt there was and still is a necessity to affirm these values in the face of an ongoing threat to appropriate, twist and denature them.

There were discussions about replacing certain members of the WCom who were not aligned with the views of the larger community, but at that time I definitely wasn't planning on joining the Committee. I had been a member of the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) before, and I thought that if I did join a group again, it would more likely be like the Council, a body seeking ways of resolving conflict: this was the kind of space I felt easiest in. I was not really interested in joining the Working Committee because it has more of an official status, and I was never drawn to wearing a suit and talking to important people. That's how I perceived the Working Committee at the time!

So what changed your mind?

At a certain point, it became clear to me that the Working Committee's role in protecting Auroville's values in this crisis would be the most impactful. But even when I was asked, I initially said 'no' because I didn't think it would be my place and, frankly speaking, I was afraid of what it would do to me. For joining a working group like that means that you become a representative of the community, so you have to follow a certain etiquette and be careful of the way you speak about things.

Also, I was afraid of starting to take myself too seriously if I had this kind of responsibility. I've always wanted a lot of humour in my life, and was aware of my inclination to be earnest, so I wasn't sure that I wanted to get into something which might turn me into a grave and austere human being! But, in the end, I felt an inner call and I agreed to serve. I was then 27 years old, and I felt it was important for me as a youth of Auroville to take a stand in what would undoubtedly shape our collective future. I also wanted to act from a space of courage, trust and faith, rather than a space of fear.

Were your fears confirmed? Did your identity become more defined, more confined, by taking up this work?

To some extent, yes. I think from the moment I joined the WCom, and especially after we really felt we needed to hold the fort against the takeover, something which was and still is definitely needed, I became more aware of Indian and world politics and perhaps less naive. In parallel, certain sides of me, which were more candid or contemplative, became less and less visible to myself.

When you join a group, it strengthens in you the common values of this group. It can be subtle, but something takes over your personal identity at times, and these other sides of you get less attention and less space for expression.

Belonging to such a group, especially in such an intense situation, also had a huge impact on the way I was perceived by others. Before joining the WCom, many people didn't know me, and those who did perceived more of my sensitive nature because of my soft touch, artistic side and love for poetry. I have always considered

myself as someone quite balanced although with a firm stand on certain values, and I was able to speak with others who had very different values and very different understandings of reality. But after I joined, this was less and less possible, because I started being perceived as a symbol of something.

Also, what was difficult for me when I was a Working Committee member was that I couldn't allow myself to feel resigned or to grieve. When you're fighting to protect Auroville's values, you need to hold on to and project hope and courage. And when you're trying to protect people's lives from very concrete threats like eviction, you can't help but feel angry. In all cases, when you're in the position of a WCom member, your focus is on putting out the fires. So you only allow yourself to feel the emotions that are at the service of your mission as a group; but because of this I wasn't really allowing myself to connect with the full spectrum of my emotions.

This means that, particularly in the current context, if you are a member of the WCom you may to some extent be wearing a mask. It's not that you're faking, but you cannot allow all sides of yourself to be expressed because the community is looking to you for support, for guidance, to give them hope and courage. You become a kind of collective psychotherapist to help people deal with their own fears and struggles!

Being a member of the Working Committee, I felt absolutely honoured by the amount of trust we were receiving as a group. All of that love and support, all that gratitude, sometimes from people I had never met, was so beautiful. It was really the best thing I experienced as a Working Committee member. But the downside is that there was so much trust, so much expectation, that sometimes it felt as if the seven of us in the WCom were carrying the whole weight of Auroville on our shoulders. I believe this is still the case today, both the trust and the weight.

Thankfully, we had a lot of good laughs among our team; and so in the end, humour was present and helped us navigate the difficult times! From what I can see, this spirit of mutual support and good humour continues with the current Working Committee.

Were there times when you did not feel fully aligned with some of the decisions of the Working Committee?

Overall, I always felt fully aligned with my colleagues and with the type of actions we decided to take. And I think this is a trait that is shared by all members of this Working Committee. In fact, it's quite incredible when the stakes are so high that we've always been really aligned and always trusted each other a lot. The fact that there was a common understanding of what is at stake in this crisis, and what we should do about it, made everything easier. There have been small instances when I was not fully aligned with specific elements of the language in a few of our communications, but here we are not talking about overall intent, just about the choice of a word or a certain way of presenting something. It's very minor and has never been an issue. And in all these instances, my inputs were always welcomed, which definitely helped me feel valued and seen.

I feel a lot of gratitude for those who shared this Working Committee path with me. It was an incredible learning experience, and a truly bonding adventure. I have a lot of love, respect and consideration for those who have been and still are in, or working closely with, the WCom.

Did your experience of being in the Working Committee change your understanding of certain things?

A big learning was better understanding how the Indian Government, the State government and big institutions like UNESCO function at their different levels. I was also amazed by the amount of connections Auroville has in India and the larger world, and by the number of supporters we have who are concerned by what is happening today.

Unfortunately, another thing I've learned is how powerless many of these people are right now to influence the situation. I had lofty ideas that UNESCO, for example, would protect Auroville in this crisis, but very quickly I understood the limitations of such entities and big institutions in taking concrete actions, especially in today's global political climate.

What did you learn about the community?

I think we've collectively been playing a lot, and for a long time, the 'persecutor – victim – saviour' role-playing game. This existed before the current administration took over, and has only intensified since then. I can see we've presented ourselves a lot like victims, putting the entire blame on an external persecutor – the administration. And some of us have agreed to play the saviours, and to carry the weight of everyone's well-being. Let me be clear: I believe that there is indeed a real persecution at play, and I'm outraged by the way some fellow Aurovilians are treated today, with a total lack of respect and consideration. It's grave, and this calls us to take action or clearly position ourselves. It's needed. But the problem is that these roles tend to stick to our skins, and we sometimes lose sight of who we are deeper within. We start identifying with the role of victims, or that of saviours. And it progressively eats away the other parts of us – until we manage to take a step back. So we need to ask ourselves, every single day, if we're acting from a space of integrity and empowerment, or from a role we've agreed to play.

Another pattern I saw is the pattern of working groups being consumed by fire-fighting. This is not new. It has been happening for years and I had already seen this when I was in the RAS. But it is even clearer today when the fire is everywhere, and all the energy of a working group like the Working Committee needs to go into reacting to events; in coordinating responses, calling out lies,



PHOTO COURTESY MAËL

Maël

responding to threats, keeping key players informed. There is no time or space to do anything else because when there is a fire, you need to try and put it out: you can't plant seeds when the forest is burning.

But what's missing is people who are not in a reactionary role and who have the time, space and skills to push for creative solutions and to offer a way ahead.

But others do not seem to be taking this up at present.

No. I think one of the reasons this is not happening is a tendency in the community to consider that the working groups should be doing these things, but the truth is that most of the time the working groups do not have the capacity to do this. Another reason is that the skilled people are already juggling different jobs and have a limited bandwidth. And of course, the current situation doesn't invite creative solutions, as we know how difficult they'd be to implement.

Still, I think it would have been lighter for me as a Working Committee member if I had had the feeling there were more initiatives regarding the way forward, or simply how to deal with the present crisis, coming from the larger community. More spontaneity in our collective responses.

Yet in the early days of the present crisis it wasn't all left to the working groups to come up with responses.

It is interesting to see how the dynamics changed. In December 2021, a lot of small groups started spontaneously organising to resist the takeover. A few people came together because they felt their inner truth was telling them to act, and they went ahead and did something, like properly documenting what was happening, talking to interested press outlets or petitioning the courts for a Stay Order. All these were individual initiatives, there was no centralisation of power, and you could feel the organic community of Auroville expressing itself. It was beautifully spontaneous.

But from the moment some of us were selected in June 2022 to be in charge of certain things, I felt that the responsibility became more centralised and these natural movements of self-organisation became less present. This form of institutionalisation might be bound to happen when a movement lasts for years, and when both fatigue and fear start to creep in, but I do sometimes regret the freshness of the early months of response.

What I liked about this initial movement was that it was very similar to how Auroville has developed. All our present achievements began with individual initiatives. People felt something was needed, so they launched a project. I think what's really fantastic about Auroville, and now I'm speaking more as an anthropologist and social scientist, is to see the amount of creativity that has been poured into this small community from individuals with an inner calling, with the intuition that something needed to happen and then went about and did it.

I'm quite sure that we wouldn't have managed to create so many things if we had done it in a very structured way, if we had been following a plan, from the beginning. It's true that sometimes it has seemed chaotic. But I think the beauty of Auroville is also in its messiness, because Auroville is for experimentation, which means there will always be failures as well as successes.

Perhaps this is the nub of present conflict, because many of those who have aligned themselves with the present administration seem to want a very structured plan to work with. They distrust the organic, the spontaneous. They feel too much falls through the cracks, that there is a danger of duplication or of different groups working against each other, unless there is centralised direction. Do you think there is a higher synthesis where spontaneous creativity can exist within a framework that gives a sense of general direction?

I agree that the dichotomy between spontaneity and planning is at the root of the conflict today, and I think a balance can be found.

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The Weltwärts programme

The German Government set up the Weltwärts programme to allow young Germans to volunteer in a different country for 6-18 months in areas like education, health, environment, culture and human rights, in order to broaden their minds and strengthen international understanding.

The North-South programme which brought German volunteers to Auroville has been running here since 2008, but now it has come to an end. However, the South-North programme which allows young Indians from Auroville and the neighbourhood to work in Germany is continuing. Karin, who has been a mentor of both groups, talks about the programmes.

Auroville Today: Why has the North-South programme in Auroville ended?

Karin: During a talk with AVI Germany about it, they mentioned that it became more and more difficult to find the needed number of minimum 12 participants to make the programme financially viable. This is because while 75% of the money comes from the government, 25% has to come from the volunteers and the body which is organising it – which, in our case, was AVI Germany. The main problem is that young people in Germany do not want to spend a full year volunteering in another country any more as they seem keener to pursue their education in Germany. Also the extreme amount of paperwork required became more and more difficult to deal with year by year.

The South-North programme which I was also mentoring had expanded so much that I stopped working with the North-South programme two years ago so I could continue with this programme, which doesn't encounter the same difficulties because the administration is done in Germany.

What projects did the German volunteers work on in Auroville?

According to German Government regulations, they had to be in the educational, social or environmental sectors. So they worked, for example, in schools like AIAT (Auroville Institute of Applied Technology), Aikiyam and Udavi, but also Thamarai, Botanical Gardens, Auro-Orchard, Discipline Farm, WasteLess, the Recycling Centre, Sunlit Future and Deepam.

Was mentoring these volunteers a big responsibility?

Sometimes, but I did not do it alone. For the North-South programme Gabi, Andy, Juergen and Kanniappan were also mentors. A few times our mentoring team had to mediate between the volunteer and the management of the project they had chosen before coming here, because sometimes expectations were too high on both sides and each had to make adjustments. The wonderful part of this work was always to see the changes on both sides after a few months.

Also, while each workplace appointed a mentor to support us in looking after the volunteers at work, outside working hours they were our responsibility. Although they were also expected to take responsibility for themselves, in the early days they would phone us and want us to fix things because they were having problems with the heat or ants in the bed and, later, we would get calls at night because their moped had broken down while they were out with friends, or they had had an accident. One of them drove into a goat in a village and Kanniapan had to sort it out.

The following are excerpts from volunteers' final reports after 12 months in Auroville

A transformative year that still resonates

Much time has passed since my Weltwärts year in 2008-09. In the meantime, I've become a mother. Yet the year I spent in Auroville deeply touched me, moved me profoundly, and has left a lasting mark on my life. It was in Auroville that I first felt a higher presence – something beyond the physical – that stirred something deep within me. That experience has helped me throughout my life, especially when making important decisions: Where do I want to live? Who do I want to share my life with? What truly matters to me? I've always had good experiences when I allowed myself to be guided by that inner connection. Seventeen years later, I still stay in close contact with Angelika from Deepam, where I did my Weltwärts service. I'm incredibly grateful for that year – and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the kind and committed souls who made it possible for me.

(Antonia, 2008-09)

Auroville – a vision that perseveres

Auroville is a project rooted in the highest ideals, guided by a vision of being that promises a true unfolding of the self. The people who choose to live there – freely and consciously –

We also tried to make sure that they were not associating with the wrong people and that they were working regularly at the projects they had chosen: always one or two were not so regular.

Generally, however, the managers of the projects were happy with the fresh energy the volunteers brought in, and the volunteers themselves said they got a lot out of the experience: for some of them, particularly those who were looking for a direction in life, it was life-changing. A few have joined Auroville, three are long-term volunteers and one former volunteer got married here and lives nearby. Others continue to visit Auroville in their holidays.

Tell me about the South-North programme.

The German Government started this programme in 2013, and I started working with it in Auroville in 2016. At present, I am the only Auroville mentor on this programme and it has become my main work.

Basically, I have to select and then prepare over one year young Indians from Auroville and the neighbourhood for a one-and-a-half year work experience in Germany, where they will work in Red Cross elderly homes or in a kindergarten. The German Government will pay 75% of the cost, and their workplace the other 25%. So far, 62 young Indians have gone to work in Germany on this programme.

The process is that people who are interested contact me and come for an interview. This year I had 42 applications and I had to make a selection because I only had 20 places. I ask questions which enable me to find out whether they have a good knowledge of English, if they already have some technical or nursing background, and if they are well motivated and open-minded.

Those who are selected receive a year of preparation in Auroville, during which time I teach them German to at least a basic level. I also introduce them to German culture through movies and help to prepare their visa papers, etc.

During this year, I see how regularly and punctually they attend German classes and how good they are at writing, for they have to write a letter explaining their motivation to the German Consulate for their visa application. When they come back to India, I have a talk with them; I make a record of each person's experience and send this back to the German Government.

How do they deal with the culture shock in Germany?

In the beginning, they all have problems with the language and need time to adjust. One of them was so overwhelmed by the variety of products in the huge German supermarkets that she couldn't decide what to buy; another had problems travelling across town to his place of work.

In Germany they have to stay in a community flat or in a hostel with three or four other people who they have not known before, so they have to learn how to organise their lives together.

The volunteers are really needed in Germany because the healthcare system is so short-staffed. Within six months at the latest they know their work well, and after that they're really helpful.

They also seem to cope quite well with the German discipline – I practice this with them beforehand in my German class where I insist they must be punctual – but as the pace of life is much faster in Germany and the workload can be heavy, they often say that after eight hours of work they are so tired, the first thing they do when they return to their lodgings is to take a rest.

But overall everybody has said they had a good experience.

The South-North students also have a mentor team in Germany. They have four weeks of paid holiday, but they also have to attend 25 days of seminars on various German and



Karin

international topics. I also go to Germany and visit them at their workplaces and organise two days of seminars with them.

Is there a dropout rate among the volunteers in Germany?

I can remember only three or four people who went back earlier. One felt homesick, another one could not adjust to the culture and the first batch came back because of the Covid pandemic. During that time the programme stopped for nearly two years.

In the beginning, most of the volunteers came back to India after the 1½-year programme. In the last two batches, about half have continued on in Germany to begin further study or vocational training, where they divide their time between school and working for a company, for which they get paid. This is new because the new visa regulations in Germany make it easier for them to take this option. When some of these people came back for holidays, I met them. They all said that each country has its pros and cons, but at present they like to have the opportunity to be educated in Germany.

What about those who come back to India at the end of the programme? Are they changed?

Yes, everybody finds it very useful because they not only have a work experience but also a much broader cultural understanding. However, in the beginning they sometimes find it difficult here to fit back into their own culture, which is a little slower compared to Germany, because they come back with a lot of dynamism concerning what they want to do.

When I meet them, I notice they are often much more structured, better organised, and much clearer about what they want to do than before they left. So you really see they have learned something in Germany. You can see that the opportunity to make international friends, to work in another culture and to manage life without helpful family support has changed their personalities.

I noticed the same thing with the German volunteers on the North-South programme. Experiencing and working in Auroville often helped them to decide what they wanted to do with their lives. Some who already had a place promised at a German university cancelled it because they developed a different interest here.

As the sole Auroville mentor organising the South-North programme here, does it feel like a very heavy responsibility?

Not really, I really like this work with the young people. It keeps me young and it brings me a lot of joy.

From an interview by Alan

Voices of Weltwärts volunteers

do nothing less than work tirelessly towards what they feel is right and true for themselves. Living together is far more complex than it often sounds in casual conversations or idealistic discussions. Auroville is home to real people – and with that come real, human challenges. What makes Auroville so remarkable to me is that it doesn't give up. Not once did I feel that giving up was ever even considered as an option. ... What matters is that the collective continues to look forward – that there is an unwavering will to keep moving, a deep certainty that the goal is attainable, and that now is simply one of the many essential steps on the way there.

(Chris, 2009-10)

A year of struggles and joy: lessons from Auroville

The first thing I want to say is that I still find it hard to put into words what I've experienced during almost 12 months here in Auroville, India. I faced many challenges and went through phases of deep depression and despair. I tried numerous things that were supposed to help me or make me a better person – and often felt like I 'failed'. But alongside those struggles, I also met so many kind, warm-hearted, and inspiring people. I experienced moments of incredible happiness and joy and caught a glimpse of what it might be like to live as an individual free from sorrow and fear – with a

clear mind and a full acceptance and surrender to all aspects of life.

(Florian, 2011-12)

Planting a different world starts within

If you want to plant a different world, it also means doing inner work – expanding knowledge, pursuing education, and embracing spiritual practice. During my Weltwärts year in Auroville, I found plenty of nourishment and space for growth in all three areas. Although my year here wasn't always easy – especially the beginning at Sadhana Forest was a real challenge – I ultimately learned an incredible amount. That year opened up the inspiration and life perspectives I had hoped for. Yes, it changed and broadened my outlook on life quite a bit. Instead of a theoretical degree in "Politics, Philosophy, and Economics", I decided to study organic agriculture.

(Paul, 2012-13 – and co-founder of the Academy of the Good Life, a community in southern Germany, together with two other Auroville Weltwärts volunteers)

A year that enriched me deeply – even personally

This year has enriched me immensely on a personal level, too. Recently, someone asked me what I had learned, and in that moment, only one thing came to mind: I lost my fear of the future and realized that life doesn't happen in the future

– it happens now. I still don't know exactly what I want to do with my life, but that no longer makes me anxious. It's okay, it's normal, because life is, in many ways, a continuous search.

(Anne, 2013-14 – now a lecturer in Tamil at the University of Heidelberg)

How Weltwärts changed my life – literally

The Weltwärts program literally changed my life. Without you, I probably would never have gone to India, never met my wife, and wouldn't be writing to you now from the USA. It's almost 7 am, and I need to get the kids ready for school. My time in Auroville is part of who I am, and just last night, I made idli for dinner using my idli cooker. Our Weltwärts group still meets every New Year's Eve – has for over ten years now. I truly appreciate all your work and dedication, and I thank you for the many years you've led the program.

(Jan, living in New York with his wife whom he met during his year in Auroville back in 2013-14)

Auroville: a place of craftsmanship and personal growth

Alongside many wonderful acquaintances, Auroville gifted me with a wealth of practical skills. In this year, I crafted and created more than I had in my entire life so far – despite always considering myself a maker.

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I learned welding, forging, motorcycle riding and maintenance, farming, building houses, climbing coconut trees, tool care, and many related skills. Beyond these, I also moved closer to my current major life goals. I got to know myself better and gained a deeper understanding of who I am.
(Max, 2015-16)

Trust and growth

Looking back on the collaboration, the mutual respect with those I work closest with, and the support we give each other, I increasingly feel like I’ve become a true part of my project. Over time, I realized just how much trust was placed in me from the very beginning. At first, I absolutely didn’t feel capable – I lacked a certain know-how. Facing a task that allowed for many approaches, and finding my own way within it, was one of the challenges I repeatedly encountered. But it was precisely these tasks, which I had to manage on my own at first, and the trust – or even more so, the acceptance – of my approach and opinions from others, that I came to experience as a form of freedom.
(Myrta, 2016-17)

Living Auroville – with head, heart, and hands

Many people have grown very dear to me, and so I didn’t just explore Auroville as an ‘exciting project’ — I lived within it and poured my feelings into it. This is something I learned here: not only to use my mind and intellect but to truly feel and be involved. Following the motto “Head – Heart – Hands”, I was able to freely express myself in all these areas, and in doing so, magical moments were created – moments I will never forget and that have changed me.
(Carina, 2019-20)

Looking back – the most beautiful weeks of my life

In retrospect, the last weeks before my sudden departure were probably the most beautiful weeks of my life so far. Auroville, my project, and the many new people I met were no longer just part of my new home – they became my family. I had never felt freer or more content than in those final days at this fascinating place. I had truly arrived in the present moment; everything I did felt like a blessing. Everything in my life seemed to have happened to bring me exactly where I was meant to be. My ‘work’ became a place of learning and constant growth. The people around me became my family. My life, a source of joy. I’ve recently learned to trust that even when things turn out differently than you might have hoped, they unfold exactly as they should.
(Max, 2020-21 – the Weltwärts group that had to leave Auroville in March due to Covid rules)



The 2022-2023 cohort

Sitting on my veranda – reflections at the end of my year in Auroville

I’m sitting on my veranda in Auroville, somewhere between packed suitcases, mosquitoes, and the fading sounds of a Tamil pop song drifting in from afar. Somehow, I still can’t quite believe it: my time here is coming to an end. Twelve months in a world that can’t be summed up in a single sentence, and I’m trying to find the right words for it. Auroville – the place where spiritual seekers, artists, idealists, goats, cheeky cows, and countless ambitious visions for the future come together. And in the middle of it all: me. With a pack of cigarettes in my pocket, mosquito spray, lots of questions, a whirlwind of emotions, and sometimes a slightly overwhelmed view of a world where everything somehow seems possible – and at the same time, sometimes nothing seems to work. I don’t leave as a hero or a world changer. I leave as someone who has learned that small gestures can sometimes have more impact than big plans. That listening is often more important than giving answers. That patience here means staying calm when plans change unexpectedly and simply making the best of it. I take away the understanding that true connection doesn’t depend on a shared language, but on genuine attention. That it’s okay not to understand everything – and that’s often where the best encounters happen. I take away the lesson that sometimes you have to go far away to realize what truly matters to you.

And that a place like Auroville leaves its marks, even long after you’ve gone elsewhere. Thank you to everyone who accompanied me here – who shared with me, helped, endured, and celebrated. Thank you to the kids who showed me how little it sometimes takes to make a day

special. Thank you to Auroville – for all the beautiful, strange, and contradictory moments. And thank you to myself for daring to take this journey. Even when I honestly wondered at times, “What am I even doing here?!”
(Oskar, 2024-2025)

Weltwärts Fun Facts

AVI Germany started sending volunteers through the Weltwärts programme right from its launch in 2008.
Prior to that, AVI Germany supported volunteering in Auroville through a different programme called “The Other Volunteering Service Abroad” (ADiA).
Since 2008, AVI Germany has sent 229 volunteers with Weltwärts to Auroville and the bioregion.
Of those 229 volunteers, 134 were female and 95 were male.
Every volunteer cohort participated in mandatory seminars: preparation seminars in Germany, orientation and mid-term seminars in Auroville, and reflection seminars after returning to Germany – adding up to a total of 390 seminar days between 2008 and 2025.

The Weltwärts experience in Auroville has even led to love:
Eight of our volunteers found their life partners thanks to the programme:
Frederik and Catharina (2016-17) met during the seminars in Germany and fell in love while volunteering in Auroville.
Four other volunteers met their partners while living in Auroville: Hannes (2011-12), Jan (2013-14), Luise (2013-14), and Svenja (2017-18).
Florian and Anneke (also 2016-17) are living together in the South of Germany together with their two children.
Two former volunteers became Aurovilians:
Luise (2013-14) and Matthias (2008-09).
(compiled by Muna, AVI Germany)

Learnings from the front line and beyond

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I do believe that having a common vision and seeing how to implement it is needed to some extent, which is why I think there is a need to have regular planning sessions in the community to see where we want to put our collective priorities. And when I say planning here, I don’t just mean town-planning, rather setting clear directions in all areas of our collective life and adventure.
But I also think that Auroville’s creativity stems from the possibility of diving into the unknown. For me, Auroville is an adventure in the unknown, a playground for testing new things. If Auroville is about the emergence of something new, as a result of people coming together without plans but with goodwill and sincere dedication, one understands why Mother repeatedly insisted on the need for flexibility, for not setting things in stone.
Auroville is attempting something which has not been attempted before, so it is impossible to say from the very beginning that we need a blueprint for what we are going to do, because from the moment you have a rigid plan you kill the creativity, the spontaneity, the movement of life that evolves. What has made Auroville possible for so long is that this flow of life could find a playground to express itself here, through individuals who have been channels, consciously or unconsciously, of those higher forces which have created what Auroville has become today.
Of course, it is very human to want to control, to plan, but Auroville is not supposed to be just a human project: it is a place to create a new being, a new society, something truly daring. So I don’t see how you can advocate for a very rigid planning process, with full control over everything that happens here, while being at the service of this emergence of the unknown.
In fact, if you listen to Kireet Joshi, who drafted the Auroville Foundation Act, it is clear that he wanted the Act, and therefore the Government, to protect the experimental nature of Auroville. That experimental nature is the crux of everything, it’s the core of the project, what makes the dream possible.

Now that you no longer are fire-fighting on a daily basis and geographically distant, do you have a better sense of a possible way forward?

I think there could be many solutions, starting with organising a well-structured and well-facilitated process for bringing people together to find creative solutions. Auroville won’t go back to what it was before, and we need to shape a new path forward. However, in the current situation it is hard to see such a process happening. There is so much instability, so many people are afraid for their future in Auroville, and right now the current administration bans people from even coming together, calling gatherings “illegal”, so the amount of participation in such an event would likely not be large.
Also, there is no way right now that people could implement whatever creative solutions they might come up with, so the motivation to participate in such an event would be very low. Still, if there are some committed people who want to dedicate their energy to a project like this, it will likely be of use one day, when the administration changes.
Some people feel this is Auroville’s ‘Kurukshetra moment’, that we are in a battle which will decide the fate of Auroville. Some Aurovilians have seemingly already decided that Auroville is finished, and have left. What is your view?
I have the sense that a very important battle is being played out right now, but this is not just about Auroville; it is happening in the whole world. Everywhere there is the rise of more and more powerful dictators and authoritarian regimes, a resurgence of fascism and the suppression of all forms of opposition while, at the same time, AI is completely changing our relationship to reality. We are already in a world situation which social scientists call ‘post truth’ and there is widespread disillusionment, especially among the young.
The situation everywhere is so serious that you can’t get out of it

by escaping from Auroville. In fact, I believe Auroville is a mirror of what is going on in the world, and if we can’t do something about it in Auroville, we won’t be able to do it anywhere else. And if we can do something here, it will have ripple effects, symbolically and on the invisible plane, everywhere else in the world.
Thankfully quite a few people are still committed to staying in Auroville, but the many people who are leaving represent a real loss of skills and creativity.
My belief is that there is indeed a big fight between different forces, but I don’t want to call them ‘light’ and ‘dark’ because I don’t like demonising things that I don’t agree with. What’s for sure is that different forces and values are clashing with each other, and right now Auroville might be living its last moments, at least the Auroville that we know.
However, I don’t think it’s the end of Auroville in Tamil Nadu. It will evolve into something else, but whether that something else is a place that I want to be connected to is another question. I can’t say what the future will be, but looking at Auroville today, it’s quite clear: if you’re interested in community life, participatory governance, or applying sustainable responses to global challenges like climate change, Auroville is no longer the most fertile ground for doing this. At least right now.
But Auroville is more than a place. It’s also a certain way of being, a spirit, a set of values and understandings. All these immaterial aspects of Auroville will surely continue to live on in the people who have been living here, so perhaps this is the moment for it to spread out into the world, to inspire other projects which may not be called Auroville but which may have similar ideals and values.
This is where I want to put my energy now. To make sure that the spirit of Auroville, the ideals, learnings and achievements of Auroville are alive in the world, and that our community continues to flourish across borders. Maybe today is the time to break out of our cosy Auroville cocoon, and to create a truly vibrant global network of Aurovilians at heart.

The world of *kolams*

In a recent issue of *News & Notes*, a twelve-week course on *kolams* was announced. It would help people, it said, to “find their compass, reorientate and be able to prioritise direction, regulate boundaries and thresholds within themselves and the surrounding world”. The course is being offered by Grace Gitadelila, who has spent many years researching *kolams* and has published two booklets and a book on them. *Auroville Today* spoke to her to find out more.

AV Today: *You have been studying kolams, the patterns which we see drawn every day in front of doorways in the villages, for more than 30 years now. What sparked your interest in them?*

Grace: My mother, Lisa, ran Aurocreation, a garment and embroidery enterprise in Pondicherry where work was given to the local women to support their livelihoods. As a child, I was surrounded by women drawing traditional Tamil designs like *kolams* and *rangoli* to put on the garments. So, naturally, from a very young age I started to copy them.

sacred geometry which maps fields of consciousness.

So the kolam patterns are fixed?

When the male priests make them in the inner sanctuary of the temple, during fire rituals for example, the measurements are very clearly coded. But otherwise there is flexibility. In fact, if you seek perfection of form in making a *kolam*, the whole purpose of doing it is negated. The important thing is the process.

Each practitioner will bring their understanding to the making of a *kolam*: there is no such thing as a ‘perfect’ *kolam*. And once you start to know a person, you know what their *kolam* will be like. It’s their signature.

In fact, in the village I can see in the physical structure of a woman what kind of *kolam* she makes. The tougher ones favour the more mathematical *kolams*. There’s a saying in Tamil that if you make this kind of *kolam*, you have a sharp tongue and are always ready to dispute!

Which kolam designs attract you?

There are certain designs where the line loops and weaves around, and these really fascinate me. They act very much like a ‘sieve’ where certain forces cannot penetrate and only the good energy can penetrate. But you have to learn to unlock the code to master this, and I loved the challenge of doing this.

Do different communities have different kolams?

Yes. Although this is changing today, every community had a typical type of *kolam*, which was a means of binding the fabric of the community together because it was not shared with other communities. However, I have been lucky to penetrate quite far into their realm and been able to access the *kolams* of different communities.

What is the effect of making kolams? Does it change you in some way?

Absolutely. The first thing is that it quietens you because of the concentration and effort required. It regulates your breathing, your heartbeat. With prolonged practice it also awakens your intuition. You become more perceptive and receptive of what is going on around you, you gain more energy and you start to feel how the subtler energies are working in and around you.

You will be challenged by certain *kolams*, you have to work to master them, to decode them. The *kolam* has to speak to you, and when you start to penetrate it, it has an effect upon you. I’ve had these experiences where there was a sudden shift within and I began to feel completely different; the *kolam* had recalibrated something within me. And this can be lasting.

I think it also opens neurological pathways which are dormant or which we are not utilising to the fullest extent. At present, we are only accessing superficial layers of consciousness. *Kolams* are a whole coded language, coding consciousness in layers, and the more we enter this, the more integral we become: we have access to more layers.

Why are the kolams we see in the villages remade daily?

The word ‘ko’ means ‘rising, aspiring’, while ‘lam’ means ‘descent into matter’, so ‘*kolam*’ means ‘the descent of an aspiration’ or ‘the manifestation in matter of an ascending aspiration’. *Kolams* are precursors of manifestation, which is why they are meant to be ephemeral: you are not meant to keep them forever. This is why they remake them every day in the village, and why you don’t see many carved in stone.



Grace

However, in the Meenakshi temple in Madurai there are many beautiful carved *kolams*.

Do other cultures have kolams?

Kolams are most popular in Tamil Nadu, but in places like Angola you can find sand drawings which relate to *kolams*. The inhabitants use them to find out when to go hunting or where to find water. In fact, in the past the Dravidian people also used *kolams* for divination.

There is a very old saying that the lines of certain *kolams* are the traces the snake leaves behind, and that these *kolams* are gateways to the *naga* kingdom of the snakes. Snakes are the guardians of the earth’s treasures and the source of poison which is also healing. We find this ancient wisdom all over the planet; the knowledge body which is encoded in certain *kolams* is everywhere.

Presumably many people who make kolams are not aware of the deeper significance of kolams. Do they still have an effect even if you are not consciously aware of their intent?

They do but, of course, if you understand the code and their deeper meaning when you make them, the effect is more powerful.

Today kolams are becoming more widely publicised and popularised through websites and designs on t-shirts, etc. Does this dilute their power?

It is true that more and more people are making them at random, and the fear of many serious practitioners is that this will dilute their power. But I think that as more people plug into and experiment with them, *kolams* become more multi-dimensional and something begins to be activated in many more people, even if they are not fully aware of it.

At present, through things like AI we are outsourcing what are, in fact, our inner faculties. We are outsourcing them to other forces that cannot embody them like us, and some of these forces are malevolent. I think *kolams* can play a more active role in us in reclaiming our inner faculties, and in recalibrating us so that we have more protection.



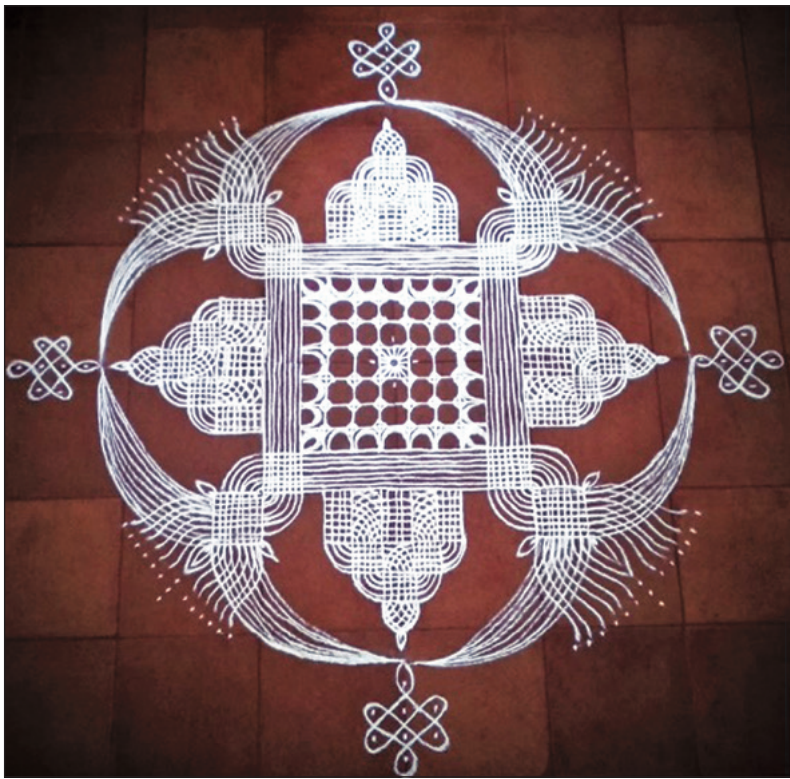
Is there a particular reason why you are offering a twelve-week kolam course in Auroville now?

Yes, I feel it is particularly relevant now because so many people are feeling insecure and need some kind of foundation. The beauty of *kolam* making is that when I do it, I experience the sovereignty of being in the moment: I feel complete, I have a sense of belongingness. And it doesn’t matter where I am. If I am vibrating with the energy of the *kolam*, I am in the flow of creation and capable of projecting images of what I would like to create in the world. And then all the politics and all the noise fall away because these are not relevant to creation.

We alienate ourselves by not allowing ourselves to create. We are all responsible beings, responsible for our creative force and how we allow that to flow through us. Nobody can take that away from us. That is our freedom, that is our birthright as human beings.

From an interview by Alan

Grace has published *MahaShakti: Universal Principles of Wisdom-Power-Beauty-Knowledge and Love in Kolamscript, Kolam Kunst and Kolam Art*, all available in the Auroville Library.



Of course, I didn’t understand them then. But while I was still young, I went to the Kalakshetra Foundation in Chennai to study dance. For every performance we made these beautiful *kolams* – many dances were associated with a particular *kolam* – and I began to understand how *kolams* are integral to dance, to music, that they are all connected. Many of the dancers had books on *kolams* and they would explain them to me.

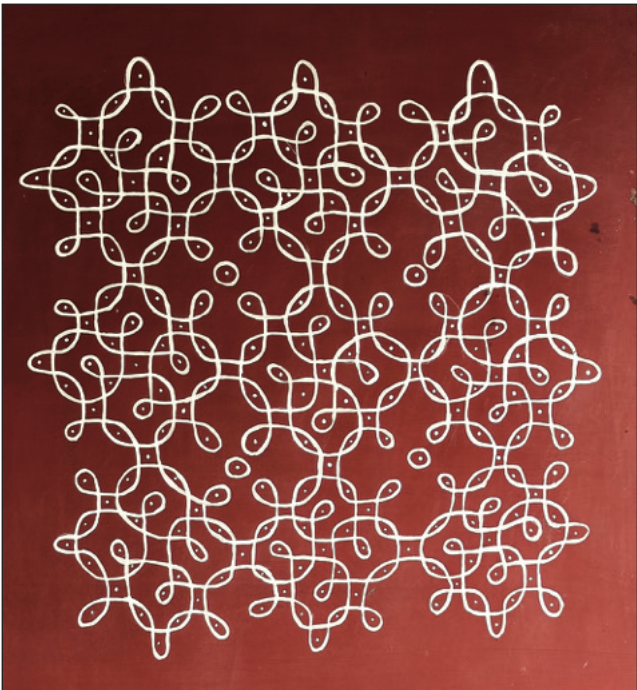
When I was older, I left Auroville with my sister to study in the Netherlands. It was difficult leaving because, like now, it was a difficult time and I felt like a deserter, that I was abandoning the ship. So I held on to my *kolam* work for dear life as I felt it protected me and gave me a sense of belonging; it was the only thread which connected me in a foreign land to Auroville and India.

In the Netherlands I was enrolled in a dance academy where I studied ballet and dance choreography. A lot of my choreography was based upon *kolam* patterns, so very quickly the teachers and the other dancers asked me to share what I knew about Indian dance and *kolams*.

So, to answer their questions, I started doing serious research on *kolams*. My mother set up a school in the Netherlands which she called ‘*De Kolam*’, and in her therapeutic drawing classes she used *kolams*, so I also studied them in her school.

What did you discover about kolams?

One thing I discovered is that *kolams* are related to *mantras*. By reciting *mantras* you alter the field frequency, and researchers using special equipment have shown that these make patterns. In each pattern there are ‘nodules’, which are places of silence, and the empty spaces around the nodules are the endless movement which takes place around the silence. The *kolam* is a visual representation of this; it is a form of



The challenges of organising Auroville

Societies are very complex organisms. Authorities in totalitarian societies attempt to diminish the complexity – which they see as a threat to asserting their will – by rigidly controlling the population through indoctrination and various instruments of coercion. But even governments in more liberal societies need to organise the activities and behaviour of their inhabitants, which they do through laws and other means.

However, when a society is an experiment in collective yoga and spiritual transformation like Auroville, none of these will suffice. While some form of organisation remains essential, it must provide the maximum possibility for the development of individual and social consciousness. And this requires a certain freedom from the external constraints of conventional societies which, of course, do not have spiritual evolution as their aim.

This is one reason why Mother initially did not want to formulate any rules for Auroville. For, as she put it,

“Auroville wants to be a new creation expressing a new consciousness in a new way and according to new methods.”

The sheer audacity of such an experiment in consciousness development, where the usual props controlling social behaviour have been removed to allow the free development of the spirit, not only arouses opposition from those who are used to exerting their will or achieving objectives through external control. It also arouses the opposition of powerful occult forces whose control of world affairs and societies is threatened by an evolution of consciousness.

All this creates an unprecedented challenge for whoever is in authority in Auroville. It is why Mother took great care to define the qualities necessary for an ‘organiser’ (her preferred term):

“No more desires, no more preferences, no more attractions, no more repulsions – a perfect equality for all things.”

“Wherever there is a personal consciousness, it means someone is incapable of governing ... those given the responsibility should be people with a... universal consciousness.”

“It is necessary that this discipline (required for community living) should be determined by someone or by those who have the greatest broadness of mind and, if possible, by him or by those who are conscious of the Divine Presence and are surrendered to that.”

In the absence of a representative of the Supreme, Mother suggested that Auroville could be organised by a small number of people who possessed what she called ‘intuitive intelligence’. But how to recognise this?

Sri Aurobindo defined intuition as,

“the power of knowing any truth or fact directly without reasoning or sense-proof, by a spontaneous right perception”,

and Kireet Joshi once replied that you can recognise a person who has intuitive intelligence by a few signs, amongst which, “They are sympathetic with everybody; there is a readiness to understand different individuals; they have a wide knowledge ... you feel happy in their presence, they give confidence.”

I don’t know how many of us are capable of fulfilling these conditions and, even if some of us did, whether everybody in the present Auroville would be willing to submit to their guidance: for Mother said that only those with the highest consciousness should be in authority, and that everybody else should be guided by them.

This needs to be better known and adhered to by all organisers, whether Aurovilians or government appointees. Unfortunately, when it comes to organising Auroville, experience seems to show that those in power – whether Aurovilians or government appointees – have had a tendency to rely upon old models of organisation, like the belief that order stems from the imposition of a plethora of rules and regulations, something which Mother

clearly wanted to avoid. And there is a tendency to assume that a spiritual experiment like Auroville requires them to be very selective in whom they admit or remove from the community; that Auroville should be populated by only the most evolved examples of present humanity.

But this is a complete misunderstanding of how Sri Aurobindo and Mother perceived their work. Sri Aurobindo explained that in his Ashram, which he termed a laboratory for a spiritual and supramental Yoga,

“...humanity should be variously represented. For the problem of transformation has to deal with all sorts of elements favourable and unfavourable ... If only sattwic and cultured men came for the Yoga, men without very much of the vital difficulty in them, then because the difficulty of the vital element in terrestrial nature has not been faced and overcome, it might well be that the endeavour would fail.”

The Ashram, he continued,

“is a field of growth, not a manifestation of perfection.” “People here [the Ashramites] are an epitome of the world. Each one represents a type of humanity. If he is changed, it means a victory for all who belong to his type and thus a great achievement for our work.”

In other words, just as in the Ashram, “all difficulties” are concentrated in Auroville in order for them to be worked upon under the pressure of consciousness which is constantly exerted here. And selecting only the cream of humanity would not enable this to happen.

And then there is the question of how Mother’s guidance is to be implemented. For if we attempt to apply Mother’s guidance without the requisite wisdom – which depends, ultimately, upon the degree to which we can identify with her consciousness – there is a danger that the outcome will be destructive rather than constructive.

Some people accuse the present Auroville

authorities of being guilty of this; that they have created conditions not so much inimical to spiritual growth – for spiritual growth can happen in the most adverse of circumstances – as severely limiting the outer expressions of that growth by prohibiting all expressions that do not conform to the official narrative and threatening to remove those who challenge it.

In fact, the present Chairman of the Governing Board has clarified that the Government of India is only here to build the physical infrastructure of the township according to what he believes to be Mother’s design: it cannot do the ‘spiritual part’, he said, for that is the work of the Aurovilians. However, in spite of real achievements in other fields, it is difficult to assert that the community has made great strides towards making Auroville a spiritual society, even though individual Aurovilians may have made considerable spiritual progress.

It’s worth remembering, however, that collective spiritual achievements of this magnitude do not happen overnight. In fact, as far as we know, this has never happened anywhere before.

The implication seems clear. All those involved in Auroville’s organisation will continue to blunder about in their efforts to solve our organisational problems until, firstly, they realise the first condition of being a ‘True Aurovillian’:

“The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.”

... and, secondly, all organisers and residents make it their first priority to create an environment conducive to spiritual growth; one where trust replaces fear, aspiration replaces conformity, and love finally triumphs over anger and hatred.

Without this, Auroville, for all its other achievements, is but an empty shell.

Alan

EXHIBITION

Together



Between 5-24 September, Centre d’Art hosted an exhibition by the local artist, P Saravanam, titled “Together”. In a world which seems to be getting speedier and more complicated day by day, Saravanam’s art returns us to the simple joys of everyday life and encounters in the villages of India. His bright colours celebrate the vitality of this life and the intertwining forms of people,



animals and nature assert the essential ‘togetherness’ and harmony of all existence.

As the exhibition introduction put it, “Through his art Saravanam reminds us of the small joys that often go unnoticed, like companionship, playfulness, and the peace found in coexisting with nature.”



This is an art to be enjoyed like a breath of fresh air.

Alan

PASSING



Vladimir Ivanov

Vladimir, who was living in Grace and working at the Matrimandir, passed away on 30 August at the age of 69.

Vladimir was born in St Petersburg, Russia and joined Auroville in 1995. He was a tireless, dedicated and inventive worker. Soon after joining the Matrimandir team in the mid 1990s Vladimir began to take a keen interest in its electrical infrastructure development. He took up the care of the heliostat operation and provided the detailed input needed to enable the heliostat to direct the all-important sun’s ray onto the globe in the Inner Chamber.

At the time of the modification of the Inner Chamber and the overall completion of the Matrimandir in 2005-2007, Vladimir developed an entirely new system to provide air conditioning to the Inner Chamber. This system functioned very well for most of the last 20 years.

An avid sportsman, Vladimir was always ready to jump in a jeep and go off with a team of youth to set up and maintain the yearly summer camp in Kodaikanal. He also enjoyed journeying to the Himalayas with teams of Aurovilians or with his two sons who would come from Russia. Filled with enthusiasm for the work and for life, Vladimir was a strong and valuable team member.

Covid dealt a strong physical blow to Vladimir in 2020, and since then he had not been able to carry on his intense work at the Matrimandir. Even so, he continued to give detailed input on the work and was often able to go up to the Kodai hills to help out with camp work.

The burial of his remains took place at the Auroville burial ground on 31 August.

How Rhino Ultimate is changing women's sport in India

The Auroville women's ultimate frisbee team, better known as Rhino Ultimate, has been around for almost a decade, and is the oldest women's ultimate frisbee team in India. In this time, it has grown into a bustling community of young girls and women who are confident, resolute, and lead with empathy.

On 5-6 September 2025, Rhino Ultimate hosted the second edition of the Singapenne Hat, a tournament geared towards beginners and women under the age of 24. Named after a Tamil song that celebrates the strength and resilience of women, the tournament focused on promoting the sport to the next generation of female players in India, while also providing a space for them to grow and challenge themselves within the game.

Singapenne – the first of its kind

The Singapenne Hat is the culmination of years-long work towards boosting confidence in young female players, and sharing Auroville's unique atmosphere with the rest of Indian ultimate frisbee. It is the first tournament of its kind in the country, where young women with relatively less experience are able to play pivotal roles and take full responsibility for their teams. A 'hat' tournament is one where players sign up individually, rather than with a team. Tournament organisers will then assign players to teams (often literally pulling names out of a hat) and ensure balance within the teams in terms of skill and experience. This tournament format helps players build bonds with unfamiliar teammates, make friends with a diverse group of people, and learn new skills. At its core, it forces players to get out of their comfort zone.



Fundraising stalls at the tournament

Auroville's younger players were encouraged to step up and act as hosts for the tournament, helping teams find their footing and sharing everything they learned with the broader community.

Mentoring the next generation

The first two editions of the Singapenne Hat attracted 80 to 100 players from cities like Delhi, Bangalore, and Coimbatore. While time and financial constraints limited broader participation, the Rhinos' vision for the future is to make the tournament more accessible for anyone who wants to play. In last year's edition of the Hat, a group of 20 players travelled south from Delhi with the NGO Y-Ultimate, which enabled a significant cultural exchange between the girls playing. As many as ten other organisations have expressed interest in sending women from all over India to participate, and the hope for the next edition of the Hat is to make that possible.

Initiatives like Singapenne cultivate a cycle of mentorship,

where experienced players uplift the next generation, strengthening the sport's foundation. For the second iteration of the Hat, six senior female players, each with unique international experience, were invited to mentor one team each, helping them get a better grasp of the game, facilitate spirited discussions, and help players find their voices.

Women-only spaces are often considered safer and more welcoming, which is crucial when organising such a tournament in India. Having a dedicated space reassures parents that their children are in a supportive environment where their safety and well-being are priorities. One of the biggest challenges organisers faced was securing parental permission to allow girls from the bioregion to participate, underscoring the importance of creating trusted, women-focused sports spaces. Beyond safety, such tournaments grow autonomy from a young age, helping young girls explore their full potential free from the pressures and biases often found in mixed-gender ultimate competitions.

Spirit of the Game

Ultimate frisbee, often referred to as 'ultimate' for short, is a fast-paced, non-contact, and historically mixed-gender sport played with a flying disc. What sets it apart from almost any other competitive sport is its defining philosophy – the Spirit of the Game (SOTG). This principle, built into every aspect of the sport (which is largely self-refereed), gives it a unique culture of fairness and respect that is rarely seen at the same level in competitive athletics.

Players bear the responsibility of officiating – whether that involves calling fouls, resolving disputes, or maintaining fairness – while playing with intensity. The underlying trust is that both teams will be honest, respectful, and uphold the integrity of the game. Players must make difficult calls in real time, sometimes against their own advantage. If you foul someone, you admit it; if a call is contested, you work

through it respectfully with your opponent. The absence of referees builds leaders who can resolve conflict without hostility. At the end of each game, the two teams hold a Spirit Circle, where an open dialogue is held about the game, compliments are shared, and any unresolved issues are addressed. Tournaments will recognise teams for their spirit just as much as for their placing, with accolades awarded to those who embody the essence of the sport.

What makes Spirit powerful is how it extends off the field. Players carry these values into their communities, creating a global culture of ultimate centred on inclusivity, respect, and connection.

Mixed vs single-gender ultimate

While mixed ultimate in India has grown into a wonderful community and has fostered many talented female players, it has also been a space where female players face systemic issues. In mixed ultimate, each team has seven players on the field, with a



A flying leap for the disc!

four-three ratio of men and women. With most tournaments requiring a minimum number of female players per team, women can find themselves recruited for the sole reason of meeting the quota, may not get actual game time during the matches and may have limited access to leadership opportunities.

Auroville youth first started playing ultimate about fifteen years ago as a mixed-gender sport. The Auroville women's team was subsequently founded by a group of players who realised that more girls and young women were inclined to play and practice regularly when there was an option of women-only practices. Auroville's female players have performed well on both mixed and single-gender teams, largely as a result of their practices and values, and have a reputation for excellent Spirit. Many Aurovilian women have represented Tamil Nadu at Nationals, and nine have represented India at global tournaments abroad.

Learning to take up space

Over the past decade, the Auroville women's team has consistently pushed back against systemic discrimination, using ultimate as a tool to work with NGOs and young girls in the bioregion, teaching them essential leadership skills and equipping them with the tools to take up space both on and off field. The Rhinos' work with NGOs has led to outreach programmes that combine athletic training with workshops on confidence, communication and teamwork.

Single-gender ultimate in India, though it may have significantly less participation, allows for much more engagement within the sport. The recent rise of women-only tournaments marks a significant cultural shift in Indian ultimate. It highlights a recognition that women benefit from dedicated spaces that empower rather than simply accommodate.

Over the years, Rhino Ultimate has grown into a steady group of about 45 regular players who practice three times a week. Core members within the team, all of whom are high-level players, organise practices, assign roles, and encourage the team to define roles for themselves as they play.

With this year's Singapenne Hat behind them, the team will now continue their work, strengthening their fundraising efforts and helping the Indian Ultimate community uplift women's sport and women's voices, until every girl in India who picks up a disc feels that the field is hers to own.

Uttara



Rhino Ultimate with Singapenne Hat mentors and organising team

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