

# Aspiring for a new dawn

Over the past three years, Auroville Today has reported extensively about the changes brought about by the new Governing Board and its Secretary, in collaboration with Aurovilians who were frustrated by the pace of Auroville's development. Many of the changes and an authoritarian approach to implementation have seemed destructive and damaging to the Auroville project. In this issue we focus on two proposals for resolving beyond the crisis.

One proposal comes from the Auroville Global Fellowship, an independent network of more than 50 national and international non-Aurovilian supporters who have contributed to the world in diverse fields relevant to the evolutionary ideals of Auroville.

Founded in 2024, the Fellowship seeks to support Auroville through information-sharing; dialogue on matters of global interest and concern; and by taking on projects that advance the spirit, values, and mission of Auroville.

On 14 January, the Fellowship published a 66-page report Auroville in Crisis & the Way Forward, which summarises key facts about the situation facing Auroville and presents a plan to remedy it in accordance with the Auroville Foundation Act, the Auroville Charter, and the principles of the timeless Indian dharma. The report, the result of many months work of more than 20 people, includes a detailed review of more than 2,000 pages of reports, legal filings and rulings, newsletters, speeches, journals, websites, presentations, financial reports, and other documents. It has been sent to select Indian officials and supporters of Auroville worldwide, and has been made widely available in Auroville. It can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/AVCrisisReport>

Part I summarises important statutes of the Auroville Foundation Act and the history of its administration until 2021. Part II provides extensive documentation of the present crisis in the areas of governance, financial management, planning and development, communications, safety and security, and impact on local communities. Drawing on the findings of the first two sections, Part III, The Way Forward, provides a blueprint to resolve the crisis and inaugurate a positive future for Auroville. It is published here in full.

Another proposal comes from Divakar, a long-time Aurovilian, who recently circulated a paper entitled Auroville and its Destinies, in which he suggested a possible way forward which seeks to integrate the present reality as a way of continuing our collective progress.

This issue also reports on the commemorative photographic exhibition of the arrival of the second caravan in Auroville 50 years ago; and on the inspiring work of Auroville artists Aurodeva, Natalie Huber and Priya Sundaravalli.



## Auroville in crisis: The way forward part III of a report by the Auroville Global Fellowship

*"In this as in all great human aspirations and endeavours, an a priori declaration of impossibility is a sign of ignorance and weakness. For by the doing the difficulty will be solved."*

Sri Aurobindo

On 19 October 2022, Auroville's Working Committee appointed by the Residents' Assembly met for two hours with the Chairman of the Governing Board to present a five-step roadmap to collaboratively resolve the project's governance crisis in an atmosphere conducive to growth and progress. The Committee underscored the skills and expertise available within the community and its wish to work with the Board as called for in the Auroville Foundation Act.

As with many other attempts to engage the Governing Board over the past three and a half years, the Board gave no meaningful response and took no action.

Members of the International Advisory Council also have repeatedly made similar requests and recommendations to the Governing Board to no avail. Madras High Court orders and judgments also have called for the restoration of mutuality at the core of the Act. Its directives have been ignored as well.

Such a posture by the Governing Board makes constructive resolution of the crisis impossible.

Crisis resolution efforts require certain conditions to be successful, including the creation of an atmosphere of trust, confidence, safety, and openness where collaborative problem-solving can occur. Four specific steps need to be taken to create these conditions for Auroville.

1. There must be an agreement among all parties to restore, honour, and revitalise the principles and terms of the Auroville Foundation Act.

2. All coercive and confrontational measures directed at Auroville residents and the community must cease.

3. Auroville's core values must be sincerely reaffirmed and rejuvenated by all parties, including the governance principles of fidelity, respect, and mutuality among the three statutory bodies as upheld by all other government-appointed administrations.

4. The Residents' Assembly and International Advisory Council need a trustworthy and sincere negotiating partner in a Governing Board.

A plan to create such conditions is needed with the support of India's Ministry of Education and other relevant stakeholders.

A successfully negotiated resolution of the crisis will result in three key outcomes that will set Auroville on a positive path to the future:

1. Restoration of operational balance among the three statutory bodies of the Auroville Foundation; and the re-establishment of Auroville's core values and principles.

2. A collaborative updating and revision of the 'Master Plan: Perspective 2025' in response to the reality of Auroville's bioregion and today's global challenges, including methodologies and commitments to ensure the creation and timely execution of Detailed Development Plans.

3. The creation of an internal self-governance assessment and development plan by the Residents' Assembly leading to effective structural and operational reforms.

### CONDITIONS AND ACTIONS NEEDED

The values and practices that guided all previous Auroville administrations need to be reinstated in keeping with the Auroville

Charter, the teaching of Sri Aurobindo, and the Auroville Foundation Act. This requires the restoration of balance, mutuality, and collaboration among the three statutory bodies as specified by the Act. The following are the conditions and actions needed:

#### A. Cessation of all actions at the root of the discord, including:

- ✦ all acts of destruction, coercion, intimidation, and punishment against Auroville residents, including actions involving the filing of false or frivolous criminal cases;
- ✦ spreading false narratives and undermining Auroville's achievements;
- ✦ delaying, suspending or reducing the duration of recommendations for visa renewals by making sweeping allegations of 'anti-Government' activities against those perceived to be critical of the administration;
- ✦ censoring freedom of speech, threatening people's homes and livelihoods, and maintaining control of Auroville's funds and assets without consultation with residents;
- ✦ forceful seizure of Auroville's internal governance mechanisms.

#### B. Restoration of operational balance by respecting and restoring:

- ✦ the community's powers and functions through the Residents' Assembly and its committees as affirmed by the Auroville Foundation Act, including its freedom to experiment in accordance with the Auroville Charter;
- ✦ the role of the Governing Board acting in partnership with the two other statutory bodies as called for by the Act;

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# Auroville in crisis: part III The way forward

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- ✦ the active role and recommendations of the International Advisory Council;
- ✦ participatory and transparent decision-making at all levels of governance, while rejecting unilateral and unaccountable administrative orders;
- ✦ community platforms for information-sharing, and communication channels to provide accurate information to the Indian Government and other relevant stakeholders;
- ✦ protection for residents from unjust or discriminatory treatment.

### C. Re-establishment of core values and principles, including:

- ✦ the foundational values of fidelity, respect, and mutuality upheld by all other administrations;
- ✦ genuine dialogue, consultation, and participation among the three statutory bodies;
- ✦ active participation by Auroville experts in planning, development, and all other essential services and units;
- ✦ use of participatory, collaborative, and inclusive approaches like Auroville’s “Dreamweaving” process to enable a synthesis of views in keeping with Auroville’s mission to achieve unity in diversity.

### D. Dialogue and Reconciliation

Successful conflict resolution depends upon sincere dialogue and reconciliation. Each party must commit to finding mutually acceptable solutions. That condition does not exist in the current circumstances.

The Residents’ Assembly and International Advisory Council have repeatedly reached out to the Governing Board to engage in sincere dialogue and participatory problem-solving, but the Governing Board has rejected all entreaties.

In claiming absolute authority for itself, the Governing Board has repudiated the legitimacy of the Residents’ Assembly and dismissed the need to sincerely engage with the International Advisory Council in the manner laid out in the Auroville Foundation Act. It continues to support coercive actions against Auroville residents. After appropriating all of Auroville’s statutory powers and functions, it has imposed destructive unilateral actions on disenfranchised residents and persists in unilateral, unaccountable decision-making.

The current Governing Board has never engaged meaningfully with Auroville’s residents and its on-the-ground realities and has remained disconnected from them. Board members do not engage with the wider body of residents and do not meet the membership requirements specified by the Auroville Foundation Act, which contributes to a lack of understanding and an inability to guide Auroville toward its founding vision and mission. Breaking with tradition, and in contrast to the current International Advisory Council, the present Governing Board has not engaged even once with the community for a real dialogue.

A successful resolution of Auroville’s governance crisis is within reach – but requires conditions of trust, confidence, safety and openness. Actions must be taken to establish such conditions. The Residents’ Assembly and International Advisory Council are eager to proceed. The Governing Board has so far remained intransigent and adversarial. Its previous Secretary, Dr. Jayanti Ravi, who spearheaded the destructive actions detailed in this report, finished her term in July 2024, but the Board’s appointees have continued to follow the same path.

The Secretary needs to engage in authentic dialogue to understand the residents’ perspectives. At the same time, the Board needs to recognise and meet with the duly selected representatives of the Residents’ Assembly, such as the Working Committee, to mutually establish a positive way forward.

The current Governing Board is due to end its term in October 2025. This provides an opportunity for a newly constituted Board to press forward with constructive changes. Such a Board, it is to be hoped, will be comprised of qualified members who are knowledgeable of Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s teachings and the vision underlying the township, and who are dedicated to resolving the conflict in collaboration with the other two statutory bodies in the spirit of the Auroville Charter, the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, and both the letter and spirit of the Auroville Foundation Act.

### E. Update and Revise the Master Plan

The ‘Master Plan: Perspective 2025’ needs to be updated and revised. Although titled a “Master

Plan”, this document is only a broad conceptual framework for township development.

Twenty-five years have passed since it was created. It needs to reflect today’s socio-economic realities and environmental needs and integrate up-to-date studies, innovations, and best practices in urban planning and environmental sustainability.

This recommendation applies specifically to the Auroville community through the Residents’ Assembly, since this is a requirement and duty of the residents as stated in the Auroville Foundation Act and is specified by the ‘Master Plan: Perspective 2025’ as work to be performed by the residents at regular intervals.

Of course, this requires that the rightful authority and space to undertake this responsibility are returned to the community and its selected planning and development group.

The ‘Master Plan: Perspective 2025’ proposes a broad municipal planning effort with an emphasis on flexibility: “It will neither be traditional nor rigid.” Since its publication in 2001, Auroville has taken tangible steps toward building the necessary infrastructure for the future city – a process that was interrupted in 2021 with the arrival of the new administration and its takeover of the planning and development function, leading to a disproportionate focus on building unnecessary roads.

The new Master Plan should be aligned with Perspective 2025’s conceptual framework, yet adapted to the evolving on-ground realities required to sustain a larger urban centre integrated with the surrounding rural communities, and included Detailed Development Plans (DDPs) which are effectively executed.

After taking control of the planning and development function, the current administration launched extravagantly costly road-building and opaque land exchanges, bypassing resident experts while bulldozing existing developments and uprooting over 10,000 trees. The plan to create a “perfectly circular road” before a Detailed Development Plan (DDP) was formulated for the future city, was hasty, unprofessional, and resulted in a poorly constructed road made of substandard materials. It did not take into account the damage that would be done to several important water catchment areas. Concerns expressed about such actions by the Residents’ Assembly and members of the International Advisory Council were repeatedly rejected, violating both the practical needs and flexible spirit envisioned by the ‘Master Plan: Perspective 2025’.

The Governing Board’s attempt to rapidly increase Auroville’s population to 50,000 inhabitants through unilateral and coercive measures has been protested by the Residents’ Assembly and members of the International Advisory Council. Both have emphasised that growth should align with Auroville’s long-term values and long-term sustainability goals, serving as a model to the world. Concerns about the administration’s actions have been expressed by Indian and international experts in urban, land, water, energy, education, and social fields. Renewed attention from the Government of India is needed in keeping with its commitment to protect Auroville’s development along with the welfare of the lands and peoples in Auroville and its bioregion.

A fresh start is needed to develop and effectively execute the Master Plan. Residents and experts from India and abroad should be involved in a collaborative, multidisciplinary effort spearheaded by the Resident Assembly’s planning and development working group as called for by the Auroville Foundation Act. Several actionable steps were proposed and many studies completed by diverse experts and external consultants prior to 2021. They need to be brought back for review and incorporated in updating and revising the Plan.

In addition to in-depth studies by Auroville’s own experts, Prof. Raag Yadava’s work, ‘Governance in Auroville’ (2023), identified further steps to expedite the process, emphasising the need to align the original Galaxy concept with the development of a Detailed Development Plan (DDP) and sub-DDPs through measures such as mobility systems analysis and the incorporation of socioeconomic and ecological considerations for sustainable development. These recommendations have not been addressed by the current administration, whose plans are not openly shared with the community or other stakeholders.

Special attention needs to be given to methodologies and commitments to overcome obstacles to progress that occurred in the past, as explained below.

### F. Execute a Self-Organization Action Plan

It’s well known that the Auroville community experienced numerous challenges in developing an efficient system of self-governance before the takeover in 2021. Auroville residents acknowledge that mistakes were made, and things could have been handled differently. That said, these issues have been selectively distorted, exaggerated, and mischaracterised to legitimise the takeover, and continue to be cited as justification for the many unsupportable extrajudicial and coercive measures detailed in this report.

To establish a positive direction for Auroville going forward it’s necessary to be clear about the nature of the challenges.

#### a. Confronting the Challenges

Auroville residents follow Sri Aurobindo’s teaching and the Auroville Charter in seeking to evolve adaptive frameworks of participatory governance that can express its goal of, as the Charter states, being a site of “material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity”.

Experimentation in developing new forms of self-organisation is central to that mission. The complexities represented by a community containing nearly 3,300 people from more than 60 nations make the work uniquely demanding.

There’s no question that Auroville has faced internal and external concerns about self-organisation problems that seemed intractable. The community readily acknowledges the hurdles and agrees that more effort must be made to surmount them. False claims by the present administration to the contrary, no one advocates a return to the status quo before 2021. Residents embrace the need for practical change reforms.

A successfully negotiated resolution to the present crisis requires support for the Residents’ Assembly to conduct a diagnosis of the community’s system of governance before the takeover, leading to positive structural and operational changes. Restoring mutual respect and harmonious functioning requires a transparent assessment that addresses root causes. A start was made on this in a 2015 Auroville Retreat. While there was some follow-up after the Retreat, much work is needed to deepen this initial assessment and implement changes according to the findings.

Experience has shown this to be an exceptionally complex, challenging undertaking. To be successful, it requires a committed three-way partnership and collaboration between the Residents’ Assembly, the Governing Board, and the International Advisory Council – precisely as the Auroville Foundation Act envisaged. The process must be based on the principles of mutuality, respect, and inclusion. The intricacy of the task cannot be solved by diktat and coercion or by attempting to bypass the need for participatory engagement in the name of ‘efficiency’.

#### b. An Effective Action Plan

An effective self-governance assessment and action plan will forthrightly address community issues that arose in the past. These include: decision-making paralysis that derailed Detailed Development Plans (DDPs) caused by rigid positions held by a few residents at both ends of the “city” issue; lack of effective accountability and enforcement mechanisms and feedback loops; a frequent inability to translate ideas into action; and challenges in building consensus through the Residents’ Assembly as an umbrella organisation. The assessment will also need to address resistance to recommendations from previous Governing Boards, International Advisory Councils, and external experts.

These issues and proposals to overcome them are highlighted in Prof. Yadava’s report, ‘Governance in Auroville’, which underscores the need for a “clear distinction between legislative and executive domains [with] dispute resolution and enforcement mechanisms” and the introduction of “standardised and short-term reporting mechanisms”.

In short, a new framework of Auroville’s self-governance is needed that allows for the effective participation by residents at various levels, enables Working Groups to operate without bureaucratic entanglements, and allows the community to establish policies that link short-term needs to Auroville’s long-term vision, using clearly defined medium-term objectives as stepping stones.

Experimentation in new forms of participatory governance is part of Auroville’s *raison d’être*. It is essential that the community’s authority and responsibilities be restored. Space to experiment, to learn from mistakes, and to try again and again is essential. The freedom to make and correct errors is indispensable for both individual and collective development.

It is also necessary for the community to learn from the past and redouble its commitment to develop more effective forms of self-governance. The collaborative development of a transparent self-assessment led by the Residents’ Assembly, supported by the two other statutory bodies, leading to the creation and execution of a participatory governance-development and action plan is essential. It should be a major priority for the Auroville Foundation as a unified whole.

### CONCLUSION

Alone among nations, it is India that has allowed and nurtured the birth and growth of Auroville on its soil. It has done so for more than half a century. Only India has the capacity to truly understand and appreciate this bold experiment, which is rooted in its ancient tradition while pointing humankind and the community of nations toward the future. India deserves the world’s gratitude. It is right that the Indian government should reaffirm that Auroville is a welcome development on its soil, and fitting that it should ensure that its development reflects the highest values of the dharma, the Auroville Foundation Act, and the Auroville Charter.

The conditions and actions outlined in this section comprise a blueprint to inaugurate a positive future for Auroville and its mission of accelerating human progress. The blueprint is clear, actionable and achievable. It calls for the creation of a plan with four specific steps.

#### Re-Establish Balance and Mutuality Among the Three Statutory Bodies

In accordance with the Auroville Foundation Act and the principles of the Auroville Charter, government officials must foster a new level of collaboration between the Residents’ Assembly, the International Advisory Council, and the Governing Board to manifest Auroville’s purpose as a living laboratory aspiring to realise unity in diversity.

#### Restore Roles and Responsibilities for Auroville Residents

The rights, protections, and freedoms of Auroville’s residents guaranteed under the Auroville Foundation Act to conduct activities promoting the Charter must be restored. This will attract new residents skilled in diverse fields who will drive sustainable urban-rural development and economic prosperity. A renewal of energy will be fostered through the affirmation and practice of the principles of Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga, positioning Auroville as both a global leader and a unique experiment for today’s world grounded in India’s immemorial spiritual principles.

#### Update and Revise the Master Plan

The re-establishment of balance among Auroville’s residents as well as between the three governance bodies must occur in tandem with collaboration in delivering Detailed Development Plans, ensuring that the conceptual ‘Master Plan: 2025’ is revised and a formal Master Plan is formulated with multidisciplinary expertise and implemented without further delay.

#### Complete a Residents’ Self-Organisation Assessment and Action Plan

With the support and guidance of the other two statutory bodies, the Residents’ Assembly needs to carry out a transparent self-organisation assessment and implement an effective action plan that drives necessary reforms and opens new pathways for progress.

As these actions take effect, Auroville will thrive in its mission to evolve individual and collective consciousness, fully embodying the spiritual vision of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The values of its Charter will guide Auroville’s governance and daily life, with all parties mentioned in the Auroville Foundation Act dedicated to translating its founding vision into reality and manifesting Auroville as a beacon of hope from India to the world.



# Time for integration?

**Divakar reached the Sri Aurobindo Ashram on 2 December, 1969; a week later, he saw The Mother for the first time. On 9 April 1970, his 20th birthday, the Mother gave him the name Divakar, one of several Sanskrit names for the sun. For some time, he lived both in Forecomers and in Pondicherry before moving finally to Auroville. In November 1973, he joined the work of building the Matrimandir, and for many years was extensively involved in its construction and management.**

**Recently he circulated a paper entitled ‘Auroville and its destinies’ in which he suggested a possible way forward which seeks to integrate the present reality as a way of continuing our collective progress.**

*Auroville Today: In your paper you write that it is necessary to take a “step forward for us all to ensure the continuation of this experiment”. Do you think that the continued existence of Auroville is under threat?*

**Divakar:** Inwardly I don’t feel that Auroville is in any danger. But the Auroville that we have come to know is disappearing, so we have to move to a position wider than where we are now so that we can find a way that the spirit of Auroville, the guiding force of Auroville, will integrate what is here on the ground today.

Today that is the Central Government. We cannot expect the Central Government to go away, because it has invested so much in this place. Even if there is a change of political party at the helm, the government will remain involved with Auroville. And if we look at our own history without bias we can see that we have actually done everything to make it easy for them to come in. We have opened all the doors by going to them for solving our problems and for financial support. So we are responsible for them being here.

*But when we asked the government for help when the management of the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) threatened to take over Auroville, they extricated us from that. Wasn’t this a positive intervention?*

When Mother left, nobody knew what to do, nobody was able to assimilate what was happening, and that led to the conflict with the SAS. That conflict was solved in the only apparent way that was available then, which was to call in the government. But from the moment we did that, what is happening today was, to some extent, bound to happen.

*But Kireet Joshi went ahead with the creation of the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) with government support because he was hoping that getting the government involved would be positive for Auroville, and a way of sharing our research with the world.*

In fact what I’m proposing is, to certain extent, what he had in mind. Auroville, with the Government’s collaboration, could provide a platform to share its research with the world: this could be an opportunity for Auroville to develop solutions

for all the issues India and the world are facing. However, the terms in which the Foundation Act, which was largely drafted by Kireet, had to be formulated have little to do with the ‘inner law’ of Auroville, the inner guidance given by Mother. It is probably not possible to conceive of a legal document which would be devoid of any ambiguity and truly do justice to the mission of Auroville. The risk of incomprehension, of a too partial interpretation, was thus there from the first hour.

It should not be the Supreme Court that decides what happens here. We have an inner law. But we have broken, betrayed, this inner law ourselves over many years, so we can only blame ourselves for inviting the present interference from the government, which has actually become a takeover.

So what I am suggesting is that we stop the bickering and the reliance upon legalese and raise our level of awareness so that we can work with all that is here at present, without losing what is essential for our growth. Today, Auroville must propose a mode of harmonious collaboration with the Central Government which will allow it to participate actively in India’s future and mission in the world, while freely progressing on the adventurous path of its collective realisation at the service of the Truth-Consciousness.

I think this is the surest means of ensuring both the continuation of the experience of Auroville and of its protection.

*How are you suggesting this could happen?*

Now that the Central Government has created a parallel structure to manage Auroville’s affairs and assets, and huge amounts have been invested in the construction of roads and infrastructure, it has become indispensable to review and define anew the relationship between “the willing servitors of the Divine Consciousness” and the official administrative organ of the Auroville Foundation and its declared objectives. I am suggesting one way in which their respective responsibilities could be clearly defined.

Regarding the residents, there can be no single rule for everyone, so it may be wiser to let individuals assemble according to their deeper affinities and to develop the collective organisation accordingly. Mother has planted all these seeds and welcomed people to Auroville in very different ways at different times to allow for different paths to the ‘goal’. So for those who are more attracted by, say, Sri Aurobindo’s intellect let them explore that part of the treasure. Others might want to work more intensively on the body.

In this way, several concentric ‘circles’ could coexist, and one may belong to one or the other according to the stage of one’s development.

The people who have made this commitment and who aspire to give themselves entirely, through the constant progress of their whole being, in every activity, to the Truth-Consciousness, would form an inner circle, and their needs would be looked after by the community. This is an area where we cannot accept any interference from outside: as Mother said, only those who have committed themselves to be here for life can have any say in how we run our own affairs.

A middle circle would be composed of those who have chosen to join the adventure of the quest for human unity in life itself, and are ready and willing to serve this ideal through work of whatever nature benefits the community, contributing all they can and all they are in every field of activity according to their individual capacities, but who haven’t necessarily made a life commitment. Their needs would also be taken care of by the community, while the profits of their enterprises and services would be managed by the community for the well-being and progress of all its members.

Then there would be an outer circle of those who do not wish to make this full commitment, but are interested in contributing their expertise and service to Auroville’s action in the world in areas like education, governance, economy, health, agriculture etc., drawing from Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s teachings and Auroville’s experience. These people would live here but they would be working with the government structures and be supported by the government financially.

All the residents of Auroville, in all three circles, would be provided with the Central Government’s guarantee.

*But are you not creating a division in the community, as some of the people living here would be dependent upon government support and others on our internal community? Could there not be divided loyalties, and if, for example, they are remunerated at very different rates, couldn’t this be a source of friction?*

This doesn’t matter, for it’s a matter of the direction that one wishes to take in one’s life. Many people will say they are not sure that they wish to devote their whole life to Auroville but would like to participate for years to come. As they will live here, there will be a relationship with those who comprise the inner circles.

*But would the different circles have different rights and responsibilities?*

As Mother said, one can share in the decision-making only if one has decided to be here for life. The outer circle can participate in collective activities because they should feel involved, but economically they will be supported differently because they have made different life choices. Of course, if people’s life choices change, they can move between the circles.

*In your proposal you foresee that the outer circle will be more numerous than the inner circle. Isn’t there a danger that this will dilute Auroville’s core values? Mother said that when Auroville reaches 50,000 it will be like a city like anywhere: this suggests she was aware of this possibility.*

The dilution has already come over the years in a terrible way. There’s already a degradation of the values regarding how people treat each other in the community.

*But will your proposal change that?*

If we decide to take this direction, to open to the possibility of integrating what is here now, it doesn’t mean that we are compromising our commitment. It means we are giving a place to that which already exists to a certain extent. But I think there will be a certain ‘sifting’ which, perhaps, will happen automatically as people find, or don’t find, their place in this new arrangement. It is up to each of us to know where we want to be.

*Is what you are suggesting simply trying to make the best of the present reality, or do you genuinely believe this is the way that Auroville must develop in the future?*

We have to remember that Auroville and India cannot be separated, so the dimension of India which is more than a nation and more than a particular government needs to be more actively integrated in our experience. Forget about what the bureaucrats are doing now. We have to feel we are an instrument for the larger India, and to

willingly use this opportunity to work for India, for this has always been one of the aims Mother had for Auroville. And if it was necessary 60 years back, it is even more necessary now given the present challenges facing India and the world.

It is a formidable opportunity when a government of a country is, perhaps, beginning to accept inspiration from what Mother and Sri Aurobindo have called down. I think it is very important that Auroville plays a role in this, and what I am suggesting is one way in which it could happen.

*Do you think your proposal stands a chance of being seriously considered in the present polarised environment?*

I think greater clarity in the relationship between the government and Aurovilians will benefit everybody. I think the government would welcome this because we have what they lack and need: the creativity, the intuition.

But there also has to be a change in our attitude. For many years we have been unable together to seek the way forward that includes everything: as Mother said, it is not a matter of choosing between this or that, but of the need to include this, and this, and this. However, integration is not a compromise between different viewpoints. It is reaching something which includes all the perspectives, but in the process they become different.

From the very beginning of Auroville there has been this incapacity to integrate what is already there. Now we have a chance to do this, but for this to happen we have to create an atmosphere that is really helpful. One has to be very quiet inside and widen oneself because all that has been happening recently is only provoking a chain reaction. What prevents the necessary widening is when one feels one’s identity is dependent upon holding a certain line, position. It takes a lot of digging to be free of that identification. But once that is achieved, it is difficult to understand why one had been acting in a certain way before.

*But adversity can be a source of greater strength.*

I hope we are at the point where adversity strengthens us, because we have lost the sense of solidarity with each other and those in power have replaced the inner demands with rules and regulations. We have lost trust among ourselves. Instead of facing our challenges together and saying how can we solve this together, we have handed over our collective power to various groups.

This is why I want to propose an open forum where anybody can present anything, not as a judgment or complaint, but as a question about something that is happening. Is this in the spirit of Auroville or not? If not, what can we do about it? For me, this is the only way to find a truer answer.

We are coming from so many different backgrounds that we are bound to have misunderstandings and not know what is to be done. However, there is something like a living truth that is valid for everybody, but to reach it we have to be able to present our questions as impersonally and as quietly as possible.

This is our work in Auroville, to change our nature collectively, and this forum would be a place where we can share, where we can contribute to a change. And the advantage of being together collectively like this is it can help us widen so that we can progress faster.

I think such a forum would appeal to everyone because it is not another working group but simply a place to offer ourselves collectively for the adventure of becoming something else.

*In conversation with Alan*

## About the Auroville Global Fellowship

The Auroville Global Fellowship was launched a year ago on Auroville’s birthday, 28 February. It was set up to be a body linking prominent supporters of Auroville with the community. They would be people of note in their own fields, who had at a minimum visited the community, been nominated by an Aurovilian and were associated with Auroville’s vision of being a place of inspiration and embodiment for global evolutionary change.

The Fellowship was inspired by the Fellowship of the Findhorn community in Scotland and has grown exponentially, from initially about thirty to forty Fellows to fifty-two to date.

A question frequently asked is, how will the Fellows connect with Auroville. Initially the sense was it would do so in an indirect manner that would reveal itself over time, but two initiatives have immediately grounded the Fellowship with Auroville. One was that a subgroup of the Fellows, concerned at the crisis Auroville is in, decided to investigate it and launch a report, part of which is published in this issue. This excellent, timely, factual and committed work is everything and more than could have been hoped for from the Fellowship and how they could contribute to Auroville. It brings an outsider’s perspective with the care

of those who have dedicated themselves to the community.

Secondly, a series of Zoom calls presented by Fellows has begun to focus on positive initiatives in the world that are linked in some way with Auroville. The first, which was open to Aurovilians as well as Fellows, presented in two different time zones, was by Ashish Kothari on Eco-Swaraj. He inspired the Fellows with tales of the multiplicity of initiatives in the world, bringing about a better planet.

There has been a dance between the crisis and the hope that the Fellowship, whilst

birthed in troubling times, is something bigger than our current challenges, and will be here in fifty years and more, mutually enriching the community and those on the outside.

Especially in these troubling times, there is much to be gained by a shared connection with friends and allies. Auroville has long been a beacon of light for many in the outside world, and the Fellowship may become a doorway where Fellows will bring to Auroville some of the wisdom and inspiration that they have gained and in turn are nourished and inspired on their visits to the community.

For more information contact AurovilleGlobalFellowship@gmail.com.

*Peter L.*



# Bhumilucis: earth, spirit & Auroville youth

*Auroville Today: Could you share about your upbringing in Auroville?*

**Aurodeva:** My upbringing was like that of most Auroville kids, I suppose. Whenever I think about it, I find myself comparing it instinctively to what a European or Western child – or any child not from Auroville – might have experienced. That comparison feels necessary, I think, to underline how unique growing up here was. My childhood had its challenges, but it was a good childhood. I had a loving relationship with my parents, which gave me stability. But beyond that, the community itself fostered me – fostered us – as children.

*Reflecting back now, what are the things that make you feel appreciative of Auroville?*

When I was 18, I moved to the West to study, and to be honest I found it hard to explain where I was from. I was terrified of appearing as an outsider, and being from Auroville certainly didn't help. Even my name felt like a signboard plastered on my forehead screaming, "I don't belong here." Thankfully, this changed over time. What I once tried to hide, I eventually could hide no longer. Auroville and the yoga practiced here stopped being something that needed explaining and, instead, became something I relied on – a tool and a posture that carried me through life.

The Yoga is the biggest gift I've taken from home, a resource I've used, even if only later on. You don't realise these things when you're a child, they're just part of the air you breathe. Although, really, it only takes a few of life's trials to learn their utility – and life is usually generous with those.

*What were some of the moments where you had those first insights or shifts – when you realised, "Oh, I have this inside me, and I can tap into it?"*

Those shifts tend to come knocking during moments of difficulty. At least, that was true for me. But it wasn't a great external misfortune – it was more of an internal dissatisfaction with life. Everything I relied on for nourishment felt fleeting – relationships, especially romantic relationships, my interests, even my work, all seemed terribly sterile. I began to yearn for something lasting, something unmoving and unchanging. An anchor. Though, at the time, I don't think I knew what that could be.

This was some ten years ago. I was pursuing a career as an artist in the luxury wine industry – a strange world, to say the least.

*Could you talk briefly how you ended up in that world?*

Sure, it's a funny story! I was in the Netherlands, studying at university. One evening, while painting, I accidentally spilled some wine on my canvas and it sparked an idea: why not try painting with wine?

I spent about two years experimenting, boiling wine, and trying to find a formula to transform it into paint. My flatmates were not amused – our student house started to smell like a distillery, and the walls of our kitchen were turning a bright shade of purple. It became a kind of fixation. Eventually, I found my formula and thought: "Maybe I could do something with this technique."

I moved to Bordeaux with my then-girlfriend and things snowballed from there. In a few years I found myself, a shy 21 year old, painting with wine for some of the world's most prestigious wineries. They'd invite me to do things like live shows for their clients on cruise ships. I stood in front of large audiences – I even had to learn words like 'tannin' and 'full-bodied'.

I began to work for various institutions and galleries and exhibited the work throughout France, Italy and other parts of Europe. Local papers started writing about it, and then suddenly I was receiving interview calls from publications like *The Telegraph*. People seemed to like what I was doing, and it sure felt good to be appreciated that way.

The project went on for several years, but the art I was creating began to feel dishonest, and dishonesty came with a price tag. I became anxiety ridden and sad for months on end. And besides, the whole thing was starting to feel kind of silly: who were all these people that praised the work anyway?

*What happened next? How did you process those feelings?*

Covid happened next, and it was a strange blessing. Work stopped, so I left Bordeaux and moved to Italy, settling in a small house by a river in the countryside. I lived frugally: no car or TV and only a trusty firewood-stove to brave the winters. I nurtured only a few close friendships. Quite unlike the life on the page I had just turned.

The pandemic gave me time and silence – two most precious gifts. It also gave me plenty of space to sit with my sadness which, I soon realised, intended to unpack its bags and settle in with me. Eventually it turned into an existential frustration and this went on for long. I began to frequent Buddhist monasteries and read Christian, Islamic and Hindu scriptures, and it helped a lot. But it wasn't until one day I picked up a copy of The Mother's *Prayers & Meditations* that I found deep consolation and comfort – like honey for a sore throat. Though I had known her teachings by heart from childhood, that day, as I read those pages, I questioned whether I had ever really read them before.

The words quenched my thirst. "Have I been sitting on this treasure all these years? And if so, why did I have to travel so far and long to be reunited with it?" – I complained to Her like a child would.

For some periods, I lived an almost monastic life and began retreating to the woods. They were moments of great replenishment – so much so, that I began to question why I ought to ever go back. Eventually that question always gave way to more pressing concerns – like the need for a hot shower or tending to tick-bites.

Aurodeva is an artist and art therapist born and raised in Auroville whose work displays a rich blend of creativity, introspection, and connection to his roots. Influenced by the environment of his upbringing, Aurodeva is currently completing advanced studies in art therapy and psychology, all the while committed to fostering growth and well-being through his therapeutic practice and creative efforts. His recent project, *Bhumilucis* (Land of Light), is one example of this. It is a project that connects children with the red earth of Auroville, a playful union of spirit and matter through collaborative art.



*What is an art therapist, and how does psychology, art and healing come together? Is it something that also enriches your own artistic expression or something you primarily offer to others?*

Well, I'm not a physician, nor am I a healer with a magic wand – unfortunately. My role as an art therapist is more that of an investigator, one who works alongside someone to uncover the hidden resources they already possess within themselves to overcome a crisis or difficulty. At the heart of the practice is the quest to reclaim that luminous segment of our being unyielding to circumstance and untouched by the tides of the mind. I don't rely on my skills as a therapist alone, but rather, on the belief that, as creative beings, we are capable of transforming even our darkest shadow into light. It's in this certainty – or perhaps I should say faith – that I base the work. While we may not be able to find solutions to all of our life's trials, we may certainly, with a bit of grace, discover the resources we need to endure them.

In this context, then, creativity isn't just something that bears fruit – it's a seed for transformation, a way for life to push itself forward, away from immobility, ignorance and disease. In a moment of sorrow or hardship, even picking up a brush and doodling, however badly, or singing, however off-key, can become a sacred act – an ode to light. The healing arts are a language that

speaks not in mastery, but in honesty. And every hand, no matter how inexperienced, deserves to express itself.

I've seen this while working in therapy with convicts in a high-security prison. These weren't petty criminals; they were felons serving life sentences: people who'd been well acquainted with hell on earth before coming in there. When the opportunity was offered to me, I accepted it immediately because I wanted – and still hope to – understand the nature of suffering, and how could I do that if I was too afraid to even look at it? This is something my professor insisted on often: "We must be like alchemists of our own being," he would say. "How can you expect to transform your lead into gold, if you're too afraid to look at your sorrows? And we mustn't despair, the more sorrow someone finds in themselves – the more lead they find – the richer with gold they will be when they finally decide to transform it."

My colleagues and I spent months visiting the convicts to carry out workshops behind bars. One of the activities we proposed was making little spheres out of glue and newspaper, which were then painted yellow – like little balls of light. Hundreds of them! What at first seemed like a tedious and almost silly activity, in that context, became an act of joy. There were smiles and pats on the back when their work finally came together and hung on the gray prison walls. It was a strange magic, seeing a group of hardened prisoners, tattooed from head to toe, make coloured paper balls and proudly showcasing them to their fellow inmates and prison guards. I now understand that if we see our creative efforts – no matter how big, small, beautiful, or ugly – as important contributions not just to our community, but to life itself, as an offering for the sake of offering, then we're on the right track.

*continued on page 5*



A joint effort fostering cohesion and harmony

I always found my way back sooner rather than later, but one thing was clear: in those brief periods of solitude I found more fulfillment than years dwelling aimlessly in the cities.

My psychology professor told me something that helped me make sense of my predicament. "Auro!" he'd say, "If you stay in the world all the time, you'll spread yourself too thin, losing your being. But if you stay out of it too long, you risk losing the pulse of life itself. Think of yourself as an accordion, Auro. At times, you must fold inward and gather yourself. But then, when you expand back into the world, you create music – offering your melody, without ever questioning why." This touched me. It was a poetic analogy and it was also akin to the Integral Yoga I'd grown up with. For now, it felt like the right solution to my existential tug-of-war.

*What are you currently studying?*

I'm finishing up a master's degree that combines psychology and the healing arts. The decision came from a newfound sense of duty to align my creative efforts to something more...useful. And if I was to rejoin the circus of western society after Covid, I couldn't, for the life of me, go back to wine-painting, so at the 'ripe' age of 29, I decided I ought to go back to school. I was awarded a scholarship and moved to Milan to undertake the intensive two-year degree. In this time I met my professor and other important teachers who shaped my practice and work. The programme was full-on. Over those two years, between wading through pages on Freud and Jung, I worked with individuals, psychiatric patients and even gypsy communities. It wasn't easy, and it took a lot of my time – time, I confess, I would have sometimes preferred to spend in solitude.



Four mandalas made by the children. Each mandala measures about 2 x 2 metres



continued from page 4

This was also the hope behind *Bhumilucis*, the project I carried out while volunteering with Auroville schools.

#### What was that like, making the exhibition?

*Bhumilucis* is a collaborative art exhibition involving nearly 100 Auroville school youth, aged 3½ to 14, using only Auroville earth and flora. It was inaugurated at the Citadines Centre d'Art in January. The project was deeply personal, and it offered me an opportunity to reconnect with the home I hold so dear – a home that has given me so much. I was also moved to see the school teachers, some many years ago, were my own teachers, playing a crucial role in sustaining the students and enriching the project with their dedication.

The project evolved very organically. We began by introducing the young artists to the idea of working together to create a unique earth-based exhibition. They were divided into groups, taking on responsibilities such as foraging, painting, or crafting their own earth-based paint, affectionately called “mud-goo.”

The focus was on creating something beautiful while fostering cohesion and harmony in their collaboration – a quality that, ironically, seemed to come far more naturally to them than it did to most adults I've worked with. At times, I heard the children say they didn't like the piece they were working on, or that they thought a classmate had a better hand at drawing or colouring. But when all the pieces came together, they sang as one. It was no longer “my work” or “your work,” but a symphony that stood on its own. And the words in this melody spoke of their story – of who they are and where they're from.

Finally, with our shared intention, three of Auroville's schools came together to unite their individual pieces and, in the end, collectively forge our exhibition with a variety of installations, paintings, and “mandalas”.

The exhibition was always at the heart of what they did. It was important that, in the end, their efforts be displayed for all to enjoy. This gave the work a great deal of value. Each piece became a dialogue between the artists and their home, a homage to the

land from which they hail. And when they inaugurated it, together with their parents, teachers, brothers, sisters and friends, it stood as a gift to the community – a celebration of their talent, unison and belonging. The overwhelming response from within and outside Auroville was deeply touching for everyone involved.

#### How did the idea come about? What inspired it?

The exhibition, *Bhumilucis* or *Land of Light*, is an attempt to create a visual union between spirit and matter through creative expression...an easy task! The name too reflects this well: *Bhumi*, meaning ‘land’ in Sanskrit, represents the material realm where we keep one foot firmly planted, while *Lucis*, meaning ‘of light’ in Latin, represents the ethereal realm where we place the other.

I like to think that we needn't look very far to find spirit in matter. Our soil, especially Auroville's earth, is so raw, vibrant, alive, and yes, I like to think, Divine. This project was born from a desire to honour it. And who better to collaborate with than Auroville's school youth, who are so deeply tied to their land?

It is part of their lives; they play and run on it. No matter how much a parent might scrub – and scrub they do – their clothes remain coloured with it. It's on their hands and feet, it's in their hair and under their nails. It's in their very being!

On some days, while working with them – hands dusted with earth, covered in the leaves and seeds we foraged – I'd find myself thinking that there is as much of a Work tree seed in the heart of an Auroville child as there is an Auroville child in the Work tree seed. Both carry the quiet promise of growth, of blossoming into tall, noble beings – rooted, reaching, and full of life.

Making the exhibition has been both an honour, and a learning experience. I cannot imagine that they learned from me even half as much as I did from them. The work the children created is, I believe, a promising testament to the community of their brilliance. It shows us that our creative gifts are, in fact, of utmost importance to the Order of this universe. And, like the accordion that asks not why it must fold inward and expand again, we too, with our music, can blossom from any internal hardship, back unto the light.

In conversation with Chandra

#### Bhumilucis: The Exhibition

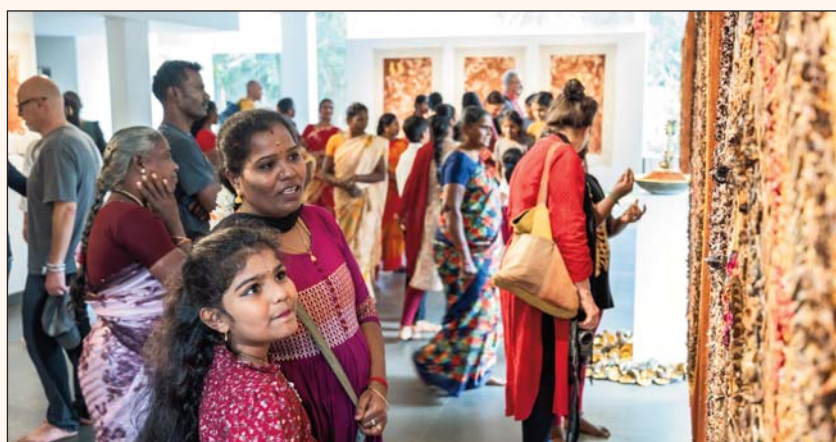


PHOTO: MARCO SAROLDI

The opening of *Bhumilucis* was a quiet triumph for collaboration. Over 300 people gathered to celebrate a body of work created by nearly 100 young artists. From the first moments, it was clear the exhibition wasn't just about the art – it embodied the magic of collective effort.

The journey through *Bhumilucis* begins in a room filled with photo documentation, offering a glimpse into the creative process. Images of children foraging, mixing pigments, and working together bring to life the energy that shaped the project. This narrative leads into the second room, where vibrant mandalas and other art-work showcase the fruits of their labour.

What makes *Bhumilucis* compelling is how deeply it draws from Auroville itself. The children worked with the red earth and flora of their home, their hands immersed in the land that inspired them. The art feels inseparable from its source: textured mandalas resonating with a connection both grounded and transcendent. The shimmering gold woven into the pieces illuminates the balance between the physical and spiritual worlds.

The true magic of *Bhumilucis* lies in its

collaborative spirit. Watching children as young as three and as old as fourteen come together was a testament to the power of unity. Their foraging, painting, and experimenting with handmade pigments embodied a harmony that often feels elusive. Their joy at seeing their work embraced by teachers, parents, and the community was perhaps the most moving part of the evening.

Attendees were visibly moved, reflecting on how something so profound could emerge from such simple materials and young hands. The children themselves were in awe, not just of the final pieces but of what they had achieved together. The pride and wonder in their eyes affirmed the transformative power of collaboration.

*Bhumilucis* is more than an exhibition – it is a celebration of connection, creativity, and community. It reminds us that art, at its best, isn't about individual perfection but the resonance of the collective. This project left a mark on all who encountered it, for both its beauty and the hope it inspires in what we can achieve together.

Chandra

## “Inner Landscapes”

The first thing that strikes you about any exhibition of Priya Sundaravalli's is the sheer fecundity and variety of her work which makes it impossible to classify her.

These features were on display again in her latest exhibition, ‘Inner Landscapes’, at the Pitanga Cultural Centre, where the intimate spaces were filled with the exuberance of her creations in which matter, in all its myriad forms, seems to be radiating life and vitality.

This particular exhibition presents work she created in ceramic residences in Jingdhezen, China and in Shikaragi, Japan. ‘Inner landscapes’, she explains, refers to the fact that the works carry the flavour, atmosphere and energies of the land and place she created them in. “In Japan, she says, “I very much felt the presence of the land and everything being animated by life forces,” and this is evident in works like *Earth Speak*, which, in its dark swirlings, evokes the density, the ‘beingness’, of the energy of the earth.

Priya doesn't plan her work beforehand. “I have no idea what I am going to make. I go blindfold into these cultures so I am thrown into this dark space which I really have to feel out.”

One piece which exemplifies her ability to absorb the landscape and culture in this non-mental way is *Homage to AsoSan*, a richly textured, multi-glazed ceramic piece, which, at



Dragon Play, glazed ceramic tile painting, 140 x 60 cm

Priya felt China was different. “There is a sweetness in the people, there is a perfection in their work, but what I found striking was the sense of an ancient history behind everything, which I did not immediately perceive in Japan.” Priya was drawn to the Chinese ink paintings which are done very spontaneously. “Following my experience in Japan, part of me became bold, gender issues dropped away and then the real thing can come out.” This new freedom of expression and spontaneity is reflected in larger pieces of glazed tile painting like *Dragon Play*, which seems to catch the whisper of a moment, and *Axonal Chatter*, where the dense interweavings evoke the mycelial networks of trees ‘chatting’ with each other.

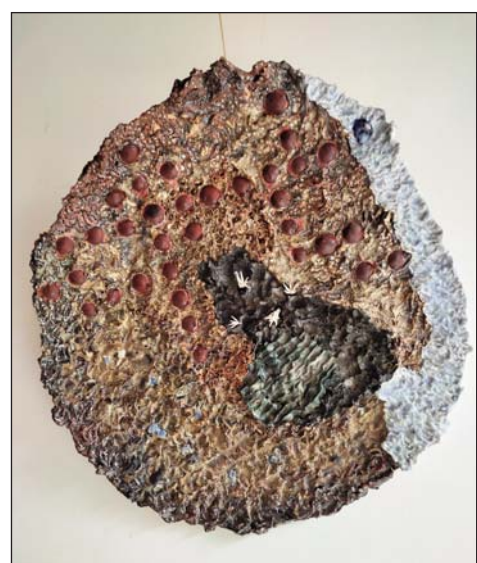
The exhibition also has some fine glazed porcelain plates, minimally inscribed using cobalt oxide. When they are held to the light, they are translucent, reflecting the myriad shades of blue. They are like a metaphor for Priya's work which reflects, refracts, celebrates, the abundance of the natural world while evoking the ‘innerness’ which silently upholds it.

Alan

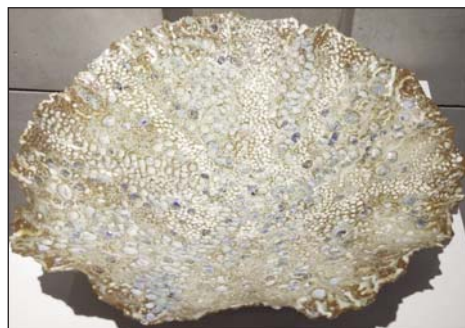
A short video of the exhibition can be seen at <https://youtu.be/jfdz78Fpzdc>



The Quickening, glazed porcelain with cobalt oxide, 18 cm



Homage to Aso San, ceramic plate, 46 cm



Coraline dreams, ceramic bowl, 51 cm

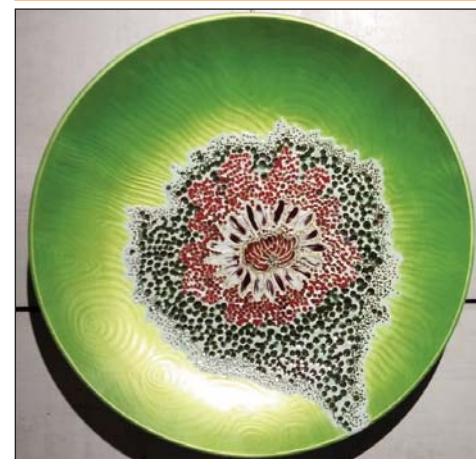


Earth speak, glazed ceramics, 44 cm



Taking the train to Shikaragi, Japan

After gaining medical and engineering degrees in India and the USA, Priya Sundaravalli joined Auroville in 2002, but only started ceramics full-time in 2012. Her pottery path started in New Mexico, USA, where she was taught by Felipe Ortega, a Jicarilla Apache medicine man and master potter famous for his hand-built and flame-proof 'Apache bean pots' made from mica-ceous clay. This was followed by long ceramic internships in Korea, The Netherlands, China, and Japan. In 2014 she opened her own pottery in Auroville and named it Sipapu, a Hopi word that means "place of emergence". It refers to a small hole in the floor of a kiva, or pithouse, that symbolises the entrance to the present world.



Guanyin's Bloom, shallow ceramic bowl, 46 cm

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI



# Brushstrokes of belonging

**Auroville Today:** *Could you tell me about the very beginning? Art was in your life from the start?*

**Nathalie:** My brother and I grew up with art around us. My mom, who was divorced and still very young, was attending art school in Paris at the time. Her father, my grandfather, was a painter, so there was this artistic lineage. Being a single mom, she was very busy, especially as she was doing photography during that period. She would often leave us with our grandparents. I remember sleeping in my grandfather's studio and vividly recall the smell of oil paint, turpentine, and linseed oil. Those scents are etched in my memory.

**How did you make the move to India?**

I was born and grew up in Paris until I was seven, and then we moved to India, though not directly to Auroville. My mom, Anita, always had this idea of going to India. She had even tried to go once before without my brother and I. She attempted the journey in a caravan with an American student at the time, but it didn't work out. They got as far as Russia before she had this instinctual feeling that something wasn't right about leaving us behind. So, she turned around and came back to Paris.

Later, circumstances – including a fire in our Paris apartment – seemed to signal that it was time to leave. This time, we took a flight to India. We first landed in Mysore, where my brother and I were enrolled in an Indian school. We didn't speak English back then; we only knew French. My mom gave us one instruction: if someone asks, "What is your name?" we should answer, "My name is Nathalie." That was it, our key to everything.

**And how did you adapt to this new environment?**

Surprisingly well! Kids adapt so quickly. In no time, we were immersed in school life. Every morning, we'd sing the Indian national anthem – though I didn't know what the words meant until much later. I felt like I became a little Indian girl. I wore Indian dresses and made friends easily. Mysore was my first real introduction to India, but my strongest memories began when we arrived in Auroville.

**What were your first impressions of Auroville?**

When we came to Auroville, one year later, it felt like a dream. I vividly remember the huge hole in the ground where they were building the Matrimandir. It seemed monumental to me as a child. I remember standing there, staring at the workers and the stairs leading down. On our first day, I met other children my age, like Gopal and Rose, and I immediately felt a sense of belonging. That feeling of "I'm home" was very strong.

One of the traditions back then was to send a photo to The Mother. My mom had a picture taken of us – her and her two kids – and sent it to Mother. She approved it, and soon after, we met her. Meeting Mother was unforgettable. I was convinced she could see everything about me – all my thoughts, even the naughty ones! I brought her flowers, and when someone else took them from me, I remember feeling puzzled, thinking, "But they were meant for her." Mother saw my expression and laughed.

**It sounds like that meeting left a deep impression.**

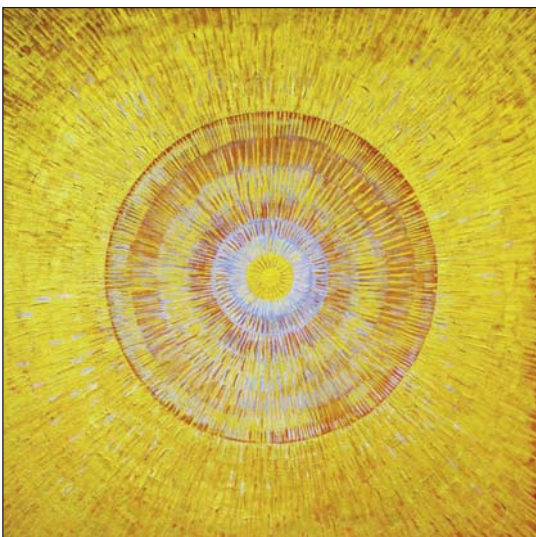
Oh, absolutely. I lived in a sort of semi-fantasy world as a child, and meeting Mother felt like stepping into something beyond reality. When I knelt before her, I put my head on her lap and felt her hand on my head. I remember looking up at her, and she was smiling. She started speaking to me, but I couldn't hear her. I later thought maybe she was speaking without sound. My mom recalls Mother responded to me with such joy, and that she said something about it with laughter to Champaklal.

**How did life evolve for you after that?**

Arriving in Auroville for me felt like life truly began. Things became stable for the first time – no more moving schools or shifting environments. I loved it. There was freedom but also discipline.

For instance, every morning, the whole school meditated together. It was a mix of structure and openness.

Auroville was unique because of the sheer diversity of people. There were Indian kids, Tibetan



Sun

kids, and children from all over the world. I remember making friends instantly, like with Renu, with whom I had an immediate and deep connection. There was also a constant flow of interesting personalities passing through the school. Artists, thinkers, and educators came to share their knowledge with us. It was a rich environment.

**And as you grew older?**

My teenage years in Auroville were intense. The community faced challenges, especially during the societal conflicts of the time. Suddenly, we were part of an adult world where big decisions were being made, and we were exposed to the complexities of collective decision-making. It was a lot to absorb, but I learned so much about human behaviour, conflict resolution, and society.

At 16, I visited Europe for the first time to meet my father. That was an emotionally complex experience, but it bridged something essential in me, and created a deep bond with my father. Eventually, I left Auroville to explore the world.

**What motivated you to leave?**

I wanted to know who I was outside the context of Auroville and rediscover myself as an adult. I wanted to experience life beyond the boundaries of Auroville. I felt like I needed to step out of the rooted identity I had grown up with. I was drawn to art, beauty, and intellectual pursuits. In Paris, I immersed myself in museums, galleries, and books. It was like being a sponge, soaking up everything I had missed. I also worked various jobs, including fashion photography, and discovered different facets of myself. The city has a history that speaks through its walls and streets. Walking through its avenues, peeking through open doors – it felt alive with stories of those who had passed through before me.

**How did your art evolve through these experiences?**

My art has always been a way to connect to my inner world. Whether through painting, writing, or

photography, I find it's a space where I can express something deeply personal and timeless. In Auroville, as a child, we enjoyed painting in Last School with friends. I used to send some of my paintings to Mother. As an adult, I rediscovered that joy of creation. Each medium – watercolours, acrylics, writing – has its unique charm and challenges. For me, it's more about the essence of what I feel coming through.

**Could you share more about your creative process?**

It often begins with a feeling or an essence that I'm trying to capture. Sometimes, it's like holding onto something intangible that hasn't yet taken form. Whether I'm painting or writing, it's about letting that essence guide me. I've learned not to overthink or control the process too much. It's about trust and allowing the flow.

**Do you face challenges during this process?**

Oh, definitely. Criticism, for example, can be both a blessing and a burden. Early on, I received a lot of feedback, sometimes harsh, from more experienced artists. While it helped me grow, it also planted doubts. There's always that inner voice saying, "You're not good enough." Over time, I've learned to use criticism as a stepping stone rather than letting it stifle me. Creating art is a deeply personal journey, and you have to find your own balance between listening to others and staying true to yourself.

**It seems like your philosophy goes beyond art – it feels almost spiritual. How does that tie into your experience with beauty?**

For me, the need for refinement and beauty is essential in life. It's not about grand gestures or perfection but finding harmony and meaning in the simplest things. Beauty sustains me. Without it, I feel like I can't breathe. This is especially true now in Auroville, where so much has changed. I think beauty – in all its forms – is a kind of nourishment for the soul. It reminds us of what's possible, of the higher aspirations we're capable of as human beings. Whether it's a painting, a song, or even just the way sunlight filters through a tree, beauty has the power to uplift and inspire.

**Has Sri Aurobindo's philosophy influenced your art and life?**

His work has been a profound influence, especially his interpretations of the Vedas. What struck me was how he uncovers layers of meaning that go beyond the literal. For example, a word in Sanskrit might represent something physical, but with his interpretation, it uncovers a deeper spiritual Reality that is revealed within the many layers. Reading his work feels like unlocking doors within myself, connecting to something beyond the mental realm. It's almost like a map of the soul, guiding me to explore inner spaces that I then try to express in my art.

**And your recent work – how has that evolved?**

Lately, I've been experimenting with new techniques, like using gel plate for monoprints. It's been incredibly liberating. The unpredictability of the process, the layering of colours, and the surprises that come out of it – it's like being a child again, discovering something for the first time. I recently exhibit-

Born in Paris, Nathalie grew up surrounded by the evocative scents of her grandfather's painting studio. At the age of seven, her life took a profound turn when her family moved to India, eventually settling in Auroville.

In this interview, Nathalie reflects on her journey across cultures and the diverse influences that have shaped her work as a visual artist. She shares her thoughts on art as a deeply personal and intuitive process, her inspiration from Auroville's and Sri Aurobindo's ideals, and how she navigates the challenges of staying connected to beauty and purpose in a changing world. Nathalie's insights offer a window into the mind of an artist who sees creativity not just as an act, but as a way of living and connecting with the deeper essence of life.



ed some of this work, and it felt different this time. I wasn't worried about how it would be received. It was about sharing my playful exploration and creativity. That's a freeing feeling. I also feel like this work captures a sense of immediacy and rawness that's different from anything I've done before. There's something powerful about embracing the unknown and letting the process guide you – it's both exhilarating and humbling.

**How do you see these recent experiments fitting into your overall artistic journey?**

Well, I think it ties into my desire to keep learning and exploring. I've always felt that art is a journey, not a destination. These monoprints have reminded me of the joy of experimentation – the way art can surprise you, even when you think you know where you're headed. Sometimes I feel like I'm rediscovering why I fell in love with art in the first place. There's something so pure about creating without worrying about perfection. This phase feels like an affirmation of that philosophy, and it's helping me reconnect with the essence of why I create – to express, to explore, and to just play. It's also allowed me to step away from self-imposed expectations and simply let the art happen, which is deeply liberating.

**Do you find that this freedom influences other aspects of your creative process?**

Absolutely. It's like a ripple effect. When I allow myself to be spontaneous with one medium, it spills over into others. Even with my children's book illustrations, I notice a new lightness and sense of play that wasn't as present before. It's funny how letting go of control in one area can open doors in unexpected ways. I've been trying to incorporate this spirit of exploration into everything I do, whether it's painting, writing, or even teaching workshops. It's become a central part of how I approach creativity. I think it's also helped me connect more deeply with my audience. When you're authentic and open in your work, people respond to that – it creates a dialogue, even if

it's unspoken.

**Speaking of your children's books, do you approach those projects differently?**

Writing for children is such a joy – a magical balance between storytelling and visual creativity. I begin with the story itself, letting the narrative unfold naturally, almost like a conversation in my mind.

*continued on page 7*



Nathalie in Last School in 1971



A page from the children's book *The Miracle Forest*



## The Draupadi painting

**D**uring a particularly difficult time, I was experimenting with spontaneous brushwork – just breathing through the movement. It was a process of allowing the strokes to flow without overthinking. Among the pieces I created was one called Draupadi's Vow. It was simple yet deeply evocative, completed in a single breath – a brown brushstroke over the red square, the square symbolising the Shakti.

The inspiration for the piece came from Draupadi's powerful moment in the Mahabharata. Publicly humiliated while menstruating, Dushasana dragged Draupadi by the hair into the assembly and tried to disrobe her.

She prayed to Krishna, who ensured her sari grew endlessly, thwarting the assault. In the aftermath, Draupadi took a terrible vow: she would not wash or bind her hair until it was washed in Dushasana's blood. Her hair, left unbound, became the symbol of her defilement, her unyielding memory of humiliation, and the fiery resolve that would drive the Pandavas through their long exile and the bloody eighteen-day war.

Draupadi, fire-born and of incendiary beauty, embodies shakti – the fierce, transformative energy that is both destructive and redemptive. Her vow, steeped in grief and anger, is a testament to resilience and reclamation of power in the face of degradation.



At the time I painted Draupadi's Vow, I was grappling with profound grief and anger over the recent events unfolding in Auroville. The sweetness and beauty of the vision I had once seen seemed to be fading, leaving me disoriented and deeply hurt. In Draupadi's story, I found a reflection of my own emotional turmoil – the same need to channel despair into strength, to transmute helplessness into purpose.

The painting, though simple, remains deeply significant to me. The brown brushstroke felt like the unyielding earth, grounding yet raw, while the red background symbolised both the violence endured and the fierce energy of transformation. It captured the essence of resilience, reminding me that even in the darkest moments, there is the potential for renewal and power.

*Nathalie*

*continued from page 6*

Once the essence of the story is captured, I start thinking about how to bring it to life visually. The illustrations come later, as an extension of the writing, designed to complement the words and evoke a world that feels alive and captivating for young readers.

For me, creating for children is not just about telling a story; it's about building a little universe for them to explore. Children have such vivid imaginations, and I feel a deep responsibility to honour that. Every detail matters, and it's incredibly rewarding to see how kids

interpret and engage with the worlds you've created. I often use watercolours for their softness and playfulness, which match the tone of children's stories perfectly.

The process is intuitive, flowing, and deeply personal – similar to my painting in general. It's both humbling and exhilarating, as it taps into the joy of my inner child while creating something honest and heartfelt. Ultimately, it's about crafting a universe that resonates with a child's sense of curiosity and wonder.

*And the connection to your inner child seems to be a recurring*

*theme for you.*

It really is. I think we all carry a part of ourselves that never grows up, that remains curious and imaginative no matter how old we get. For me, tapping into that part is vital, not just for my art but for staying connected to the things that make life meaningful. When I'm able to access that sense of wonder and play, it feels like coming home to myself. It's a space where anything is possible, and I think that's where the best art comes from.

*In conversation with Chandra*

## Commemorating the second caravan

**L**ast December, there was a photographic exhibition in the Tibetan Pavilion which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the second caravan in Auroville. But who were these people? And what was the significance of their journey?

Just over 50 years ago, on 20th December, 1974, thirty five young people, mainly French, sat in a circle on the grass in Aspiration, blinking in the bright Indian sun. They had just arrived after an epic two month journey of 13,000 kilometres which had taken them from France, through Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan to India. Now they were listening to Alain Bernard informing them about their lodgings, which had been specially created in Aspiration and other places to receive them.



Departure from Paris on 10-10-1974

This was the 'second caravan', the second time a caravan of young people had journeyed overland in various vehicles from France to Auroville.

The adventure had begun some months earlier when Jean-Claude Bieri, one of the Auroville pioneers, had returned to France to organise a caravan to bring new people and much-needed equipment to the fledgling community. He contacted the Auroville International France Association for assistance, and they played a leading role in catalysing and organising the project. They informed friends and contacts of the Association and soon 20 people came forward to pay the 1000 francs per adult, 500 per child, for the overland trip to India. In those days this was a very popular mode of passage and destination, fuelled by the spirit of freedom and adventure that was in the air.

A Mercedes bus and other second hand vehicles were purchased, modifications made, and on the evening of the 10th October, 28 adults and 4 children left Paris.

The 'caravanners' were a motley collection of individuals. Some were inspired by the vision of Auroville, and were looking forward to joining the experiment. Others were simply looking for adventure and a chance to see exotic places and experience different cultures. And there were plenty of these. As Christine, one of the caravanners, recalled 40 years later, "We camped along a stream in Yugoslavia in a cold, damp fog, and were chased away by policemen who took us for a travelling circus. We sang around a campfire with kids from Anatolia; we tasted caviar washed down with vodka with an aide-de-camp of the Shah on the shores of the Caspian Sea. We negotiated with Afghan authorities to get them to release two drivers of the J7 van, prisoners near Herat after having run over a peasant. We toured the bazaars of Istanbul and Kabul and politely refused to trade one of the girls for 50 camels. We drank Turkish coffee on the shores of the Black Sea, ate Yugoslavian yogurt that tasted like cement, Iranian nans as big as carpets.... We camped at the foot of the Taj Mahal, in the middle of the temples of Khajuraho and prayed in the sacred dust of Brindavan."

Inevitably, given that they were such a mixed bag of individuals, tensions surfaced. Some wanted more sightseeing, others wanted to get to Auroville as quickly as possible. A few did most of the chores – the driving, cooking, washing up, cleaning, and negotiating with the authorities – while others only turned up for meals.

"There were the professional protesters," remembers Christine, "who wanted daily meetings and who argued about whether decisions should be taken by a relative or absolute majority; there were the reasonable ones who tried to discipline the undisciplinables; and then there were those who were stubbornly silent."

In other words, they already represented a version of the community they were coming to. In fact, as Paul Pinthon put it later, "The caravan helped us, prepared us, for what we were coming to. I took the caravan as a tool to learn, because I knew it was a kind of mini Auroville."

However another caravanner, Gundolf, was better prepared for Auroville: he had travelled overland and arrived here in February 1973. "At that time I had expected to encounter a very different kind of society. But when I arrived I was disappointed because I thought that the people here would be so amazing, and they were not. It made me realise that we all carry our 'baggage' wherever we go, and my job was to transform something inside myself. So it was with this understanding that I came the second time."

Many of those who came with the caravan left soon after arrival: they had only come for the adventure and the sightseeing. But a few stayed on and are still with us.



Camping in Yugoslavia

So what was the significance of this odyssey? Paul Vincent was clear. "It would be the seed that would form the body of the revolt of Auroville against the oppression of the so-called 'leaders' and 'owner' of Auroville in 1975. If these people had been able to predict what would happen, they would never have allowed us to come to Auroville."

Christine remembers that Alain said that before the caravan arrived, the Aspiration community was 'sleeping'. "He said we brought fresh new energy and this was the core of the revolution against the Sri Aurobindo Society." Paul Pinthon agreed. "We were full of enthusiasm, we were new, we were fresh. In that sense the second caravan brought young blood in order to participate in the fight with the Society."

But the caravan was not just important because it imported the student spirit of May '68, the spirit of protest, into Auroville. "We are commemorating the



At the Khyber Pass

caravan today," continues Christine, "because it touches the very aim of Auroville, which is adventure: it was a jump into the adventure. For example, when Hervé arrived on the day of the departure from Paris he just left his car in the street below the Association office. For him his old life was finished."

Claude feels it is also important for others to learn about the caravan. "The other day we spoke about it to the kids from the school. It was a revelation for them to realise how we journeyed on that adventure for they – and perhaps many others who have come more recently – know hardly anything about the history of Auroville."

Auroville today is a very different place. Is that sense of adventure still alive for the caravanners who are still here?

"We are now experiencing the most dangerous adventure we've ever had: we don't even know if Auroville will exist two years from now," says Christine. "We want to create a society based on something higher than socialism and all the other ideals, which is why we have all the difficulties."

Gundolf is hopeful. "This is an adventure, an experiment, and we don't know how it will end. I think there will be a moment, hopefully sooner rather than later, when the sun will shine through the clouds again because the aim of this place is so amazing, so important for the world, that it cannot be allowed to fail."

"I have never regretted for one second to have come for the adventure," says Claude, "and it is still an adventure, although a very different one. But when you go through difficulties, life is much richer. And, along the way, we met fantastic people, like the Dalai Lama, Indira Gandhi and JRD Tata. I could never have experienced this if I'd remained a dentist in France."

*Alan*



Arrival in Auroville 20-12-1974



AVFO enters new agreements without RA involvement

The Auroville Foundation Office (AVFO) continues to enter into institutional agreements without consulting or informing the Residents' Assembly (RA). At least 14 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed since January 2022. They are: with the University of Pondicherry (January 2022); with the Central Public Works Department (March 2022); with the IIT Madras (2023); with the Indira Ghandi National Centre for the Arts (February 2024); with the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (May 2024); with the Department of Art & Culture, Pondicherry (July 2024); and with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (September 2024).

As per a press release by Auroville Media Interface (formerly Outreach Media), during the recent visit from the Auroville Foundation to Gujarat led by Dr Jayanthi Ravi and 3 unnamed members of the Governing Board, MoUs were signed with: The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara; with the Kamdhenu University, Gandhinagar; with the Indus University;with the Auro University, Surat; with the Sardar Patel University; with the Revenue Department, Gujarat; and with the Nehru Foundation Development Centre for Environment Education Society. These MoUs remain invisible and inaccessible to the residents of Auroville. Despite multiple Right to Information (RTI) requests filed by residents, the contents of these MoUs remain undisclosed. Information about these agreements only reached the residents through social media postings and newspaper reports.

Gross negligence in urban planning alleged

On January 10, the members of L'Avenir d'Auroville, the Town Planning Council appointed by the Residents' Assembly (RA-TDC), informed the community that it had sent a letter to high government officials addressing critical concerns about ongoing developments in the Auroville project area. The concerns are that the agreement between the Auroville Foundation and the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) of the Government of India for the building of 11 radials roads lacks formal approval from planning authorities and from the Residents' Assembly; that there is no financial transparency and no clarity on funding sources or expenditure; that projects such as the Matrimandir Lake and the demolishing of part of the Vikas Radial have proceeded without Detailed Development Plans (DDPs) or Environmental Impact Assessments, causing environmental damage, safety hazards, and community disruption; that these developments continue despite strong objections from the RA; and that the absence of participatory processes undermines Auroville's collaborative values. The authorities have been urged to halt all ongoing and planned projects until these issues are resolved.

PASSINGS

Manuel Thomas

Manuel Thomas, a long-time friend and well-wisher of Auroville, left his body peacefully in his sleep during the night of January 26th. His passing is a great loss for Auroville and for his many friends and admirers. Manuel was a Chartered Accountant based in Chennai who came into contact with Auroville at the end of the 90's. For the next three decades he interacted with many Aurovilians and freely shared his vast experience in legal and accountancy matters for Auroville's benefit and that of many Auroville working groups, services and individuals. One of his memorable contributions was his work on Auroville's economics. Together with Dutch Professor Dr. Henk Thomas, he authored the book Economics for

People and Earth: The Auroville Case 1968 - 2008. It all began when, in 1997, the then Economy Study Group and Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee made a request for research and advice to Henk Thomas. At the recommendation of a few Aurovilians, in 1998 Manuel Thomas was brought in for his expertise in data management and analysis. At the time, Auroville had no statistical office and, as Manuel later said, "an almost heroic effort was made to gather income and expenditure statements and balance sheets from various locations, some in forgotten dark cellars." The more than 3,000 records of commercial units were digitized and used to do an economic analysis of Auroville units, including issues of their survival, expansion and sustainability.

GB-WCom membership questioned

The membership of the Working Committee approved by the Governing Board (GB-WCom) continues to be questioned. An email from the GB-WCom dated January 2, 2025, welcoming Newcomers and Volunteers and inviting them to weekly sessions on "Auroville the Dream", was signed by six 'members', including one member who had publicly announced her resignation a few months ago. The same member introduced herself as a member of the Working Committee during the Special Talk on Good Practices at Auroville, held in Gujarat on January 3, 2025. It has been stated that the term of office of all members of the GB-WCom had in fact ended on January 2024.

Road construction update

Road construction continues across Auroville, with at least 9 sections of road currently being built. Most of the construction work is being completed by CPWD; Michael Bonke's team is building one section of the Crown, which starts at Savitri Bhavan and goes towards the PTDC. The total cost of all of the road works that have been tendered by CPWD, according to the government E-Tenders portal, is ₹38 crores (\$4.5 million US dollars), with an additional ₹7.6 crores being spent on electrical works. These figures are CPWD estimates, so final costs could be higher or lower. Large areas of forest have been cleared and as of July 2024 the number of mature trees felled so far is over 6,560, of which more than half had a girth of over 1 metre. Additionally, more than 7,330 trees under 15 cm in girth, and more than 20,860 woody plants from the under storey have been cleared since December 2023. These are only the trees that have been surveyed and counted. Due to the sheer amount of clearing and tree felling taking place, not all tree felling and clearing has been documented. The RA-DC recently wrote a letter to the GB-ATDC with details about how the extensive deforestation in areas such as Darkali and Bliss have led to a substantial increase in surface runoff which "culminat[ed] in the breach of the Alankuppam-Kottakarai pond bund, which caused flooding in the downstream villages".

Report on Darkali bridge construction

A detailed evaluation report published in November 2024 by Satprem Maïni, Director of the Auroville Earth Institute, highlighted several concerns regarding the ongoing construction of a bridge at Darkali for the Crown Road project. The report indicates that while the initial plan called for a bridge spanning approximately 25 meters to cross a water body, the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) is now constructing a 160-meter-long structure. The excavation width reaches up to 25 meters in some areas, significantly exceeding the 9.1-meter limit recommended by the Joint Committee appointed by the National Green Tribunal. Key findings from the report include that the construction has

destroyed existing rainwater harvesting systems that previously collected approximately 3 million litres of water annually and that no drainage systems have been planned for managing water flow in an area that handles 60% of rainfall within the Crown. The project cost has increased from an initial estimate of ₹50 lakhs to approximately ₹500 lakhs. The report states that inadequate materials have been used and that the CPWD has failed to follow proper construction standards. The construction continues despite these issues and apparent violations of recommendations of the Joint Committee constituted by the National Green Tribunal Southern Bench regarding road width and environmental protection measures.

GB-FAMC halts allocation of some donations

The GB-FAMC has recently halted the transfer of some donations received by Auroville to the beneficiaries, in some cases stating that "there are few concerns that should be clarified with you, based on proven feedback." Donors are advised to ask the project executives to obtain prior permission from the GB-FAMC for their project before making a donation to it.

Evergreen Land Situation

Following a court ruling of the Tindivanam court on October 25th, the disputed land area bordering Evergreen community which had been in Auroville's peaceful possession for over 32 years has now been cleared of all vegetation. The RA-WCom informed the community that it had written to both the GB and the Ministry of Education regarding this urgent matter, requesting the immediate filing of an appeal against the ruling. This was followed by a letter of a group of 7 Aurovilians urging the GB and its Secretary to file an appeal.

Gratitude farm project terminated early

The Auroville Farm Group reported that the Gratitude experimental Demo Farm project, launched in October 2022 by the GB-FAMC as a two-year initiative to develop natural precision farming methods in Auroville, for which half an acre was set apart and which was developed by a few non-Aurovilians with a subsidy from the Auroville Foundation of 4.75 lakhs [see AVToday # 399 of October 2022], has been abruptly terminated after 1.5 years and that its half-acre of land was handed back to the GB-FAMC. The project had committed to providing training in Natural Precision Farming as per the MoU with the Auroville Foundation, and so benefit Auroville farming through knowledge sharing, but these benefits have not materialised. The Farm group also stated that there have been significant discrepancies between actual and projected crop yields. A letter from the Farm Group to the GB-FAMC requesting explanations has remained unanswered.



Auroville's development. But the book was not only on Auroville economics. It contains brief biographical notes on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother along with an overview of the Mother's vision on Auroville's economy. "We can't stress

enough that the spiritual dimension is the cohesive part of the Auroville experiment. If someone would like to duplicate it elsewhere, there would need to be a similar 'glue' in one form or another. In Auroville, it is the spiritual dimension and the dream of humanity living in harmony in an international township which brought people together," said Manuel in an interview with Auroville Today. In recent years, Manuel shared the pains and frustrations of many Aurovilians witnessing the difficulties brought by the new Auroville administration, and he wondered if this anticipated the end of the Auroville experiment. While this question remains unanswered, there is no doubt that Manuel was part of that spiritual dimension that sustains Auroville and its residents. Manuel's remains were interred in Chennai on 29 January.

Thomas Dreyer

Long-term AVI Germany board member Thomas Dreyer passed away on 6 January after a long and serious illness. Thomas was the main project manager of the German Weltwärts volunteers programme, supported by his wife Birgit. They both spent their annual holidays in Auroville, visiting the volunteers and their places of assignment. Without his many years of tireless commitment, the programme would not have been able to continue successfully for so many years. Thomas held a PhD in physics and was a widely learned and knowledgeable person. He was a very kind man, firmly based on his connection with the Mother, with Sri Aurobindo and the Integral Yoga.



Jean-Marie Lanthier

Born in Montreal, Canada in 1950, Jean-Marie arrived in Auroville in 1998. He lived in Siddhartha Forest where he passed away on the night of 31st December 2024, 74 years old. For those who knew him, he was a true disciple of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Through and through an Aurovilian with heart and soul. As he wrote on Auroville's intranet a few years ago, "When man is a little wiser, he will not complain about anything and will take the things that the divine sends him as an effect of his grace which is all mercy. The more we are surrendered, the more we will understand. The more grateful we are, the happier we will be." His remains were cremated on 5 January at the Auroville Cremation Ground.




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