

Navigating change at the Visitors Centre

The Auroville Visitors Centre is Auroville’s reception and information disseminating centre for the often thousands of tourists and visitors coming to Auroville daily. In 2022 a new management team was appointed for a two-year period. Auroville Today spoke to one of its executives, Auroananda Gajendran.

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Inside the Auroville Information Centre



The shuttle service bus



A view of the courtyard

AVToday: Auroananda, you joined the Auroville Council when you were just 19. What was that experience like?

Auroananda: It was an eye-opener. I learned how Auroville functions on a day-to-day basis and had the chance to interact with highly conscious, intelligent people. I saw first-hand how unique this place is, and how crucial it is for us to collaborate effectively. It really opened my eyes to aspects of Auroville I had never considered before. It is not an easy task to administer to a group of people who are intelligent and conscious and have different opinions on how to move forward for various reasons.

You also went abroad. What was that experience like?

I went to Germany at the age of 22. Knowing only basic German, it was a tough start. From the beginning, I had the question of what I would be contributing to the society that I had joined. But I quickly realised that I needed to learn and train myself to understand its mindset and cultural aspects. For the first three years, I did challenging odd jobs in various eateries, construction sites and festivals. Eventually I worked at a one-star Michelin restaurant, which provided me with an in-depth training. As I had previously worked in star hotels in India, it was a great experience in understanding the different business mindsets.

I also was looking for ways to support Auroville business units by importing and re-selling their products, and so connecting Auroville brands with the well-structured German and other European markets. My idea was published in the magazine of Auroville International Germany, and it caught the interest of a German investment company. They allotted 100,000 euros, and sales took off. But when the Ukraine war hit, everything fell apart – the investment company folded, and so did my business. That’s when I decided to return to Auroville, also for personal reasons. Then I read in the Auronet that the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) was looking for four new project leaders for the Visitors Centre. I applied, was interviewed, and after some time learned that I had been selected as one of the four executives. I left Germany and came back to Auroville

What was the Visitors Centre like when you arrived?

My first task was to familiarise myself with my new colleagues and listen to the managers of the various units that are located on the Visitors Centre campus. They were concerned, because the appointment of new executives by the FAMC had not been warmly welcomed. Many were unsure of what to expect and feared interference from the Auroville Foundation.

How long did it take for you to get a sense of how things worked there?

It took time. The Visitors Centre campus hosts multiple units, such as the Auroville Information Centre, three boutiques, a cafeteria, various food shops, a bookstore, an exhibition hall and even an amphitheater. Our responsibilities covered the maintenance of the campus and its accounts, the Auroville Information Hall, and the shuttle services to the Matrimandir Viewing Point and the Svaram Sound Garden. The units themselves were managed by their respective teams.

What surprised us was the ongoing debate about whether the units were service-oriented or business-oriented. We quickly realised that all units were, in fact, commercially driven — except for the Information Hall, the exhibition space, and the Matrimandir shuttle service.

How did you start addressing these issues?

We took it slowly. We didn’t intervene in the running of the units, except for the dosai corner, the campus kiosk and the Information Centre. The accounts of the kiosk and the dosai corner were not properly managed, so we decided to close the kiosk and integrate the dosai corner’s activities into the cafeteria, which made more sense. We also stopped the commercial activities at the Information Centre, moving the sale of books and postcards to the bookstore; the Centre now only sells information material about the Matrimandir and Auroville.

We then reviewed the Visitors Centre’s income and expenditure, which was just covering the running costs. All units were paying a fixed fee per square meter and a 2% turnover contribution. After consultation with several unit executives, the FAMC and the Secretary, Auroville Foundation, we have increased the turnover contribution to 5% and we are in discussion with the cafeteria about increasing their square meter contribution, as they have been contributing about 2/5th of what the other units have been paying. The additional income will help us to purchase a generator and other equipment necessary for this public space through the Government e Marketplace (GeM), an online platform that allows government departments and organisations to buy goods and services.

What happened with the shuttle service to the Svaram Sound Garden?

When we arrived, that service was still in operation, but we decided to discontinue it. The financial arrangement was not sustainable, and it wasn’t covering our costs. Now visitors who want

to go to the Sound Garden use their private vehicles or auto rickshaws. This service might be resumed in future.

What about the parking area? How has that evolved?

When we took over, all the income from the parking went to Auroville’s Budget Co-ordination Committee (BCC), which would then provide the Visitors Centre with a budget to cover the expenses of the parking area. This has now changed. The accounts of the parking area and those of the Visitors Centre have been separated. As the parking area is not considered a separate commercial unit which contributes 33% of its profits, its surplus income goes to the BCC. The parking area and the Visitors Centre no longer receive a budget from the BCC.

Some of the items sold at the Visitors Centre are quite expensive. What’s your take on that?

That was a concern for me since the beginning. I had seen that visitors were hesitant to visit the cafeteria and the boutiques because they are expensive for the middle and lower-middle-class, which is 60-70% of the footfall. But the shops are independently managed, and we can’t control their pricing. The exception was the dosai corner. When we merged it with the cafeteria, we were able to ensure more affordable food prices — like the idli, for which you paid Rs 30 at the dosai corner and which now costs Rs 10 at the cafeteria.

There were live music performances on Saturday evenings in the Visitors Centre amphitheatre. Why did that stop?

They have been temporarily paused, but not for any external reason. The cafeteria previously handled the agreements with the musicians in using the amphitheatre, but now the campus management has taken over. There’s been some confusion, with people thinking that the Auroville Foundation intervened, but that’s not the case. We’d like to resume the performances.

There’s some controversy about the route visitors must take to reach the Matrimandir Viewing Point. Can you explain?

At the request of the Foundation Office, visitors were initially required to take the pathway that went from the Visitors Centre to Bharat Nivas, to the Unity Pavilion and to Savitri Bhavan before heading to the Matrimandir Viewing Point. However, the visitors’ response was mostly negative, especially in the summer heat.

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We are trying to solve this by shuttling the visitors first to the Matrimandir Viewing Point, and stopping the bus at Bharat Nivas on the way back – which is at a walking distance from the Visitors Centre. Those who don't use the shuttle bus can walk to the Viewing Point and back directly. The reroute project is being followed up by my co-executives together with a member of the Matrimandir Access Group.

The reason for wanting to show visitors Bharat Nivas is financial; the government grant for the Bharat Nivas maintenance has been slashed, and they try to get an income from visitors, asking them to visit their small model animal zoo at Rs 50 / ticket and showing the Kala Kendra art exhibition. Other than that, there is not much to see. I don't know what the executives of the Unity Pavilion and Savitri Bhavan feel about the inflow of uninformed visitors.

Why, in your experience, do people visit Auroville?

I would say that 90% come for touristic reasons: they want to

see the golden globe and have a good time at the Visitors Centre. Most of those visitors just look around in the information hall and don't read the written explanations. They come for two to three hours max and want to have a quick understanding of what this place is about. For those people, Auroville is just another entertainment area. They ask tourist-oriented questions.

Only a small number want to know about the Auroville community and its deeper purpose. We've started offering guided tours to give those interested a closer look at Auroville's life and work, which has received excellent feedback. The one hour tour cost Rs 500 per person if they take a bicycle and Rs 690 if they go by car. Auroville youths – students who are born and raised in the community – are their tour guides.

Do the students have sufficient knowledge of Auroville?

We have taught them the most important historical facts about Auroville. We have made a list of 25 frequently asked questions, and the guides know what the answers are. And, of course, they also share their own experience of growing up in Auroville. We decide the route, which covers parts of the Residential Zone, the Solar Kitchen and the Town Hall. If they go by car, the route includes the Industrial Zone and an Auroville farm.

The guided tours have become popular, generating 15 – 19 lakhs turnover per month for Auroville. We had amazing feedback and people thanking us for this opportunity to learn about Auroville. On many occasions we had people who were staying in a hotel in Pondicherry moving to an Auroville guesthouse after having joined a tour.

What is your take on the tourist industry that is developing at the entrance of the Visitors Centre parking entrance where a plethora of people are selling hats, balloons, children's toys and the like?

It's a typical tourist scene in India, but there's a deeper economic issue. Many of these vendors are day-earners and manufacture their own products. Rather than pushing them away, we should consider providing them with a more organised space to sell their products while asking them to

Auroananda, 31, was born in Auroville, where he completed most of his education before studying hotel and tourism management at the Soorya Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology (SIHMCT). After working for several years in the hospitality industry in various cities in India and Europe, he returned to Auroville in 2023.



give a small contribution in return. It's about finding a balance between maintaining Auroville's spirit and acknowledging the livelihood of people in the bioregion; we are all interdependent.

I have the same take on the rickshaw drivers. Many people do not like their presence in Auroville. But they serve a purpose. How can visitors who park at the Visitors Centre reach any other place in Auroville? We do not provide solutions.

Because I am a Tamilian, the drivers easily talk to me. We have been discussing how best they can contribute to Auroville. There is a verbal agreement that they won't bring people from the Visitors Centre to the Matrimandir Viewing Point but they are free to bring them to a guesthouse or anywhere else in Auroville.

Your term as an executive is ending soon. Would you consider staying on for another term?

That depends on who the new team members will be and what their outlook on this work is. The current team has been incredibly honest and dedicated, though at times reaching agreements was challenging. We've done a good job addressing past issues, but there's still much to do. The new team will need to acquire a strong understanding of the ground reality to plan for the future, considering the growing number of visitors and possible new projects for the Visitors Centre.

In conversation with Carel



The courtyard of the Visitors' Centre hosted a ceramics exhibition during the Auroville birthday week

AUROVILLE FOUNDATION

Minutes of the 67th Governing Board meeting

In response to a Right to Information request of 7 December, 2024 the Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Education has sent the applicant on 3 January the minutes of the 67th Governing Board meeting held in Auroville on 31 May, 202. These have now been widely circulated. The minutes of this and subsequent meetings of the Governing Board have not been published by the Auroville Foundation Office on its website.

Major considerations and decisions of the Board as reported in these minutes, none of which have been shared with the Auroville residents, are:

(1) Auroville Maintenance. The Board noted that Auroville Maintenance, a unit that manages approximately 4,000 accounts of Aurovilians and 2,000 of various business units, has not been licensed by the Reserve Bank of India. The Governing Board decided to have the banking transactions of Financial Services be carried out by any Nationalised Bank or Private Bank which is regulated by the RBI and that the computerisation thereof could be integrated by the ZOHO ERP Solution which is being offered now for all the Units and Activities of Auroville.

(2) to set up an Institute for Medical Education synthesising the Indian system of medicine with allopathy system by collaborating with Institutes of National Importance such as ITRA and JIPMER respectively.

(3) to approve the organogram of the Auroville Foundation as designed by the Secretary, "to channelize and streamline the entire procedures in Auroville for planning, documentation and integration of data, accounting, procurement, VISA, farms and administration to function in a more organized manner."

(4) to amend certain provisions in the Auroville Foundation Act 1988 and the Auroville Foundation Rules 1997 for the betterment of Auroville, as "in the recent court cases filed by the residents, the Foundation faced a pattern of misinterpretations of certain sections of the Act 1988 and the Rules 1997". The Board noted that the Additional Solicitor General of India has given his opinion on amendments to certain sections of the Act and Rules to remove ambiguity in the statutory provisions to facilitate

a strong administration in Auroville. The Board suggested circulating the recommendations of the amendments proposed in the Auroville Foundation Act 1988 and Rules to all the Board members.

(5) regarding the Memoranda of Understanding signed by the Auroville Foundation with (a) USAID and (b) the Research Triangle Institute Global India Private Limited for South Asia Regional Energy Partnership (SAREP) Program for enhancing Auroville holistically, the Board advised the Auroville Foundation to exercise all checks and balances while dealing with USAID so that the interests of the Foundation are not compromised at any stage and that the Auroville Foundation shall have exclusive rights to copyright the partnership programme outcome.

(6) The Board noted the plans of the Auroville Foundation to sign generic MoUs with government institutions and private firms such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, BISAG and the University of Ladakh for various purposes, including the automation of land records, etc., in consultation with FAMC with proviso to identify and discuss the preamble and focused area later in detail.

(7) Social Media policy. The Board noted that, as social media has seen exponential growth both in terms of scale as well as diversity, and as there is renewed interest from local and international media for Auroville, it has become imperative for the Foundation to keep pace with the ever-increasing need to communicate the reality, progress made on development of the city and its initiatives with the Residents and other stakeholders. New trends in the media and ever-evolving media platforms also call for improved responses from the AVF for effective communication and outreach. In light of the above, a fresh and proactive media policy is required and the Board directed to submit the Auroville media policy for further approval.

(8) Environmental clearance. The Board approved payment to M/s ABC Techno Labs India Private Limited, Chennai for the submission of the phase I report regarding the procedures and steps that are necessary to get the Environmental Clearance for Auroville Township plan.

(9) New Chartered accountant. Considering that the Auroville Foundation has about 700 units grouped under 37 Trusts and having 42 GST numbers, the accounts of which are handled by five Auroville in-house accounting units that are managed by Aurovilians who are not professionally qualified, and who have not been in a position to submit the accounts in time to the Comptroller and Auditor General of India and who are also not competent to file all required statutory returns, the Board approved the appointment of Chartered Accountants M/s. MSK Prasanna & Co for accounting and allied services with effect from the Financial Year 2024-25, and it directed the AVF Secretariat to submit the Annual Report on-time for its placement before the Parliament and the Parliamentary Committee(s).

(10) Auroville Physical Education Board. The Board approved the Establishment of the Auroville Physical Education Board (AVPEB) to revitalise the physical education programme and related activities in sports and fitness in Auroville. "AVPEB is anchored in the aspiration to create a premier body of facilities, systems and personnel addressing the needs, education, research and integral development of the human body drawing information from latest scientific findings and inspiration from the works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and aligning its working with the aims and ideals of Auroville." The Board gave in principle approval for the approximate budget of Rs 2 crore and directed to submit a detailed plan.

(11) Beach land protection. Auroville Foundation has owned an extent of 2.68.00 hectares in Kottakuppam near the beach known as Gokulam. However, about half of the land has disappeared due to sea-erosion. There are two Auroville guest houses adjacent to Gokulam, namely Samarpan and Rainbow, which are not in proper use and prone to misuse by unwanted elements as they are located on the beach. The Board approved to fence the Gokulam land and to build a compound consolidating the three Auroville plots, Samarpan, Gokulam and Rainbow to protect the land of Auroville.

(12) Building and infrastructure

(a) Electrical infrastructure. The Board approved the preliminary estimates submitted by the CPWD for the construction of electrical

infrastructure for Auroville in accordance with the Auroville Universal Township Master Plan

(b) Town Hall lift. The Board approved the preliminary estimate submitted by the CPWD for the construction of a 16-person lift in the Town Hall for the benefit of elderly Aurovilians and of physically challenged people.

(c) Tamil Heritage Centre. The Board approved the preliminary estimate submitted by the CPWD of Rs 48,083,000 [approximate US \$555,000] for the renovation of the Tamil Heritage Center (THC) which was built in the year 2008. The roof has to be replaced as during winter heavy rain water flows onto the ground floor. In addition, a virtual museum is planned on the first floor of the THC at the cost of Rs. 10 crore sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, New Delhi. The entire building will be covered with sheets along with air-conditioning and lift facility.

(d) New Town Hall. The Board noted that with the envisioned growth of Auroville's population, the existing administrative building will not be sufficient to host the needs of the city and a new town hall will need to be built on the north-south axis of the Matrimandir. It will be one of the most prominent public buildings in Auroville. The Board approved the revised preliminary estimate of the CPWD of Rs 777,032,000 [approx. US \$9 million]

(13) Liaison office in New Delhi. The Board noted the proposal to establish a Liaison Office of Auroville Foundation in New Delhi to act as an Auroville Information Centre, and to receive dignitaries and officials from various Ministries and Embassies. The Board directed to prepare a detailed estimate for the establishment of the Liaison Office.

(14) Land consolidation. The Board asserted to look for out of the box solutions to enable the consolidation of land for the development of the city at large. The Board said this was imperative and emphasized and reiterated its commitment and priority to consolidate land for the development of the city in comparison to keeping the land parcels held by Auroville outside the city limits. A presentation as to how lands are valued and exchanges are approved was given to the Board members, along with statistical information on the land exchanges undertaken so far, including Auro Orchard.

Auroville's governance crisis: a call for transparent residents' control

Claude and Abha have been living in Auroville since 1974 and 1978 respectively. For the last 45 years, Abha has been running the handicraft unit Shradhanjali while Claude has become a scholar who has authored several books and articles on Tibet, China, India and on Indo-French relations. Here they share their perspectives on the ongoing developments in Auroville and what could be done in future.

Auroville Today: The last time we did an interview with both of you was in 2007 [AVToday # 225, November 2007]. At the time you spoke about the need for more fraternity between Aurovilians, about the fact that many decisions were being made in back rooms not involving the community at large, that there was a lack of transparency and, generally speaking, that there was a lack of trust. That was more than 17 years ago. How do you see the present situation?

Abha: In 2007 the talk was about the attitudes and issues between Aurovilians and the members of the working groups selected by them, about how decisions were made; but today we are confronted with the attitude of the Governing Board and its Secretary, and by extension that of the members of their working groups, who are taking all kinds of strange decisions without informing or consulting the Residents' Assembly and without any accountability to it. Crucial lands have been exchanged, here an existing road is ploughed up, there a new road suddenly appears; accountants and chartered accountants are changed without units' consultation; residents' criteria are imposed; residents' maintenances are summarily stopped; people are 'taxed' the city service contribution and there are consequences if they don't pay. These are just a few of the recent issues and there are many more. Today, these groups use – and I believe misuse – the powers given to them by the Board and the Secretary, sometimes quoting that they act in accordance with a decision of the Governing Board taken in a meeting of which the minutes were never published. Today, the residents are being completely bypassed.

What do you think is the cause of this?

Abha: Undoubtedly we brought some of it on ourselves, because our governance was not what it should have been. The working groups constituted by us did not have the power to implement even what they knew was correct. Any decision could be – and in effect many were – questioned by someone or some people and then shot down. We had not yet found ways for effective consultation and implementation.

Claude: But now the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. What galls me are not only the impositions, but also the ways in which things are being imposed. Back in 2007 we talked about the lack of fraternity. Today we see fellow Aurovilians, who have chosen to work with the Secretary and the members of the Governing Board (most of whom have little understanding of Auroville), lording it like masters over other Aurovilians. Fraternity, compassion, they are far from what these Aurovilians are manifesting.

Abha: I'll give you a small example. Since maybe 15 years, Shradhanjali has been using seeds and seedpods, sourced from Auroville's



Abha and Claude on a tour to the Himalayas

forests, to make seed jewellery and other decorative objects. From the start, in return for these gifts of nature, a part of the profits from this range have been donated to the Auroville foresters through the forest account of Auroville's Financial Service. However, the Funds and Assets Management Committee constituted by the Governing Board (GB-FAMC) decided last year to close this collective Forest account. Recently, while inspecting our accounts, the GB-FAMC has instructed us that "Shradhanjali will stop henceforth any forest contribution"! It is nonsensical.

Claude: I'll give you another example. In 1991 the Governing Board approved the creation of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture with His Holiness the Dalai Lama as its Patron. Ever since, we have been giving our yearly accounts directly to the office of the Auroville Foundation. Though we were never registered under any Auroville trust, it was fine with the Foundation, the auditors and even the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, which audits the accounts of the Auroville Foundation.

I used to give yearly donations to the Pavilion. More than a year ago I made a donation of Rs 40,000, but the GB-FAMC blocked the transfer of this donation to the Pavilion. When I asked for the reason, I was told that the Pavilion had not been registered with the Donation Channeling Group constituted by the GB-FAMC. We filled the form. But till today the money has not been released. Then last week the GB-FAMC decided that the Pavilion needed to become a unit of the Service Trust – of course, without discussion or even consultation. The high-handedness is very upsetting. And this is not an isolated case. There are other projects and

units that are not able to access donations made to them because the FAMC has blocked it.

What I see are attempts to 'control' units and individuals: the units through the new accounting software Zoho which replaces Tally and which, I believe, makes it possible to monitor the work of the units in greater detail; and individuals through that Standing Order on Residents' Criteria. [See AVToday # 426 of January 2025]. And we see decisions being taken which are, from the legal point of view, questionable, such as reducing the number of trustees of the various Auroville trusts from three to one, which is illegal according to the trust deeds. I can't escape the impression that the people in charge do what they want regardless of laws of India and of the spirit of Auroville. Sometimes I feel that we are presently living in Absurdistan.

Is there a deeper cause for all these issues?

Abha: I think there is. Mother, on 3 February 1968, spoke about India having become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of present-day humanity, and that India would be the site of its resurrection to a higher and truer life. And she added, *And the clear vision: the same thing which in the history of the universe has made the earth the symbolic representation of the universe so as to be able to concentrate the work at one point, the same phenomenon is occurring now: India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that there will be the... cure. And it is for that – it is FOR THAT that I had to create Auroville.*

So we shouldn't be surprised or upset that we are facing difficulties. It is our task to find solutions. And then there is that conversation of Mother with Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala and

Roger Anger [see *Mother's Agenda* vol. 13, 4 April 1972], where she said that living in Auroville will not be easy. *I know it's not easy, but we are not here to do easy things; the whole world is there for those who like an easy life. I would like people to feel that coming to Auroville does not mean coming to an easy life – it means coming to a gigantic effort for progress ... It is the sincerity of our attitude and effort which makes a difference. People should feel that insincerity and falsehood have no place here – they just don't work, you can't fool people who have devoted their entire life to go beyond humanity ... We are here to prepare a superhumanity, not to fall back into desires and easy life – no.*

Even assuming that many of us have failed in this constant urge for making progress, why this violence? Even if we needed the kick to remember the true purpose of being here, why such extreme and harsh methods?

How do you see the future? Suppose the Government of India decides one day to return the management of Auroville to the Aurovilians, how do you think we should act?

Abha: The situation cannot continue as it is and the management has to return to the Aurovilians. More and more people are leaving Auroville. But the question will be how can we manage by ourselves? The Mother has given some indications. In that same conversation of 4 April 1972, Mother spoke about the qualities required to organise life in Auroville. *We must strive for Order, Harmony, Beauty and... collective aspiration – all the things which for the moment are not there. We must... you see, being the organisers, our task is to set the example of what we want others to do. We must rise above personal reactions, be exclusively attuned to the divine Will and be the docile instruments of the divine Will – we must be impersonal, without any personal reaction.* It will be our task as residents to find people who, if they have not yet reached this phase, are at least recognisably on the way. That deeper level is the first need.

Claude: This implies that Aurovilians will need to accept that their working groups can assert authority if needed, but in a transparent manner. Back in 2007 I spoke about the need to build a ground-level consensus, which means that decisions are not only taken by the seven or eight members of a working group, but by a larger number of people actively participating in decision making. I still believe this is a way forward. It's not that everybody needs to be involved in all aspects of Auroville. Perhaps each working group can have a separate support body that can help in making decisions pertaining to the work of that working group. This is just one idea. But it's time that Auroville starts thinking about the structures required for the residents to regain control of the affairs of Auroville.

In conversation with Carel

REFLECTION

The power of silence

"In absolute silence sleeps an absolute power"

From Sri Aurobindo's Savitri

Sometimes I feel I am drowning in words. And not only mine. For it seems that every day someone in Auroville is bombarding us with words, telling us what to think, to do this and not to do that, to listen to them and not to others.

And what effect have all these words had? Mainly, it seems, to divide us. This is hardly surprising because it is achingly rare that our words are the expression of the soul. Rather, they tend to be the expression of our very ordinary natures. We use them to boost our egos, win arguments, control others or put them down, and to disguise our real feelings and motives. We use them to fill gaps in a conversation and gaps in our lives, and to make us feel that we truly exist: 'I speak, therefore I am'. We argue about what they mean in the Auroville Foundation Act while we breathlessly await their interpretation by judges, as if Mother's vision can be defined and decided in the courts.

Moreover, in the present polarised environment where we rarely interact personally with

those who think differently from us, we tend to judge others on the basis of the words they use on public forums rather than on their essence, on that which is unspoken.

And, yes, we also use words to express love, solidarity, compassion and wisdom, as well as our deepest and highest aspirations and ideals. But, at least in our public forums, such expressions seem increasingly rare.

So how can we begin to heal the rifts which our words, among other things, have created between us?

One way is to begin using words differently, to evoke our better selves (and here Sri Aurobindo's guidance on the use of psychic self-control in speech is invaluable). Another way is simply to collaborate in a shared task that is beyond politics. We did this in past Matrimandir concretings when a diverse collection of humanity united in ferrying chetties of concrete up the unfinished structure.

Today that option is no longer there. This is why I think we need to find another way to be with each other but beyond words. To simply be with each other without the armoury and armouring of language: no speeches, no PowerPoint presentations, no opinionated exchanges. Just...silence.

We've done this before. Quite often, at the end of even difficult meetings, we have gathered ourselves in silence. Of course, there are many different kinds of silence. There is the deep silence of surrender or aspiration, and the shallow silence of simply not talking while one is planning one's next meal (Mother once referred to this superficial kind of silence as 'noisy!'). But sometimes these moments of being together without speech have felt far more profound and unifying than the thousands of words expended by us over the previous hours.

But to stay silent with each other, and for longer, won't be easy. Some people may find it difficult to sit in the same room with others who they think have done serious harm to Auroville and/or verbally attacked them or their friends. Moreover, many of us feel threatened by prolonged silence. We feel shackled when we cannot outwardly express ourselves. And silence may force us to go within, which may lead to an uncomfortable re-examination of what we believe in and what we are doing.

For the power of true silence, where the mind and emotions are put to sleep, is in its potential to reveal undiscovered parts of our being and open

us up to new insights, new sources of wisdom. And deep inner silence does not preclude outer expression. In fact, it is the source, the wellspring, of true expression, of true action.

This is why, if we could manage in a diverse group (which may be a small group initially) to sit together for some time in a spirit of surrender and with the deep intention of asking Mother to show us a unifying way forward, I believe that a new way to deal with our present challenges might begin to emerge.

There is no guarantee of this happening, of course, and those who favour quick fixes may quickly opt out. But if something does begin to emerge, it would need to be nurtured carefully, for the temptation to verbalise it, to externalise it too quickly, might deform it. In fact, it may take many meetings before someone feels ready and able to formulate whatever is emerging.

But if together we could succeed in birthing something new, something genuinely unifying, it could go a long way towards healing the deep rifts that have opened between us and bring a huge dose of fresh energy to the collective adventure of materialising Mother's Auroville.

Alan

Auroville's global community continues to offer support

Friederike Mühlhans has a long experience of working for Auroville International (AVI). Since 1997 she has been a board member of AVI Germany and since 2003 she has been Secretary of the AVI Board, with a four-year break when she served as Chairperson. She first visited Auroville in 1991 and has returned almost every year since, together with her husband Christoph and sometimes also with their children and grandchildren.

Auroville Today: How did you first come into contact with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and with Auroville?

Friederike: It was in 1981. I had two small children and it was a time when I was searching intensely for the deeper meaning of life, and also to find out what I could truly offer to these beautiful new beings. I found a book called *The Mother* on a friend's bedside table and it intrigued me a lot. The friend gave me Satprem's *The Adventure of Consciousness* in a German translation. There was a picture of Sri Aurobindo on the cover and it was one of these moments when something hits you: I had the feeling deep inside that I had known him for a very long time. In the following years, I read a lot by Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, including the *Agenda*. I remember waiting eagerly for the next volume to be published.

I had already heard about Auroville but it was the time of problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society and because of my young children it was difficult to travel. But I always wanted to come here because I had learned that it is Mother's project and I knew it would play an important role in my life.

In 1991 I came for the first time with an artists' group which was travelling to different places in India. We spent only an afternoon in Auroville, but we had the opportunity to climb to the top of the Matrimandir over scaffolding, and this was an amazing experience. The next time my husband and I came was in 1993. We came for a week and during that time we got into contact with Gillian because we had a friend who, like her, created artisan pieces with glass beads, and who wanted to give some work for the ladies from the villages who were working for Gillian.

Soon after this, Wolfgang from Auroville International (AVI) Germany heard about us and invited us to their annual meetings. We went, hesitantly at first, because we thought a German association must be something very stiff and boring, but then it was actually like being with family. When one of the AVI Germany board members stepped back in 1997, I was invited to take his place. Then, at one of my first meetings of all the AVI centres in the world, Mauna, who was the Auroville representative for AVI at that time, asked me to join a session of the International Board. I was elected to the Board shortly after in 2001. Making my modest contribution to the cohesion of this international body and to help secure the international range and scope of Auroville, as laid out by The Mother, has become a matter close to my heart.

Today there are five of us on the board of AVI Germany and my role is to keep a strong contact with Auroville and the international AVI association, and to publish, together with a small team, a regular newsletter to keep our 180 members and other subscribers informed about what is happening there.

What was the kind of work you were doing in the early days of AVI Germany?

It was mainly giving information to people about Auroville as there was not yet an Auroville website. We organised three-day long annual meetings, which we still do today. These attracted up to 100 people and a lot of information was given, especially to those people who were going to Auroville for the first time. But we were also keen on the personal exchange, so we always tried to invite Aurovilians, give talks on Integral Yoga, offer yoga sessions and organise cultural evening programmes with concerts, readings and joint activities like dance, improvised theater and singing together.

The main questions we were asked were, 'How can I organise a visit to Auroville?' and 'How can I become a Newcomer?' Those who had already visited also wanted to know how they could stay in touch after their return to Germany.

Have there been major changes in the work of AVI Germany over the years?

There is much more information about Auroville on the Internet now and this has taken a lot of this work off our shoulders. Another major part of our work has been raising and channeling donations to projects in Auroville, and this has remained constant over the years.

A new and major organisational responsibility for us began in 2001 when we started arranging for young German men who wanted an alternative to military service and do their 'civil service' by volunteering for one year in Auroville. The original programme was not paid by the government and the young people themselves had to contribute. But after a while we felt we wanted to also offer a similar opportunity to young women. At that time, the German

Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development had established the 'Weltwärts' (worldwide) programme which allows young men and women to work and learn in development projects abroad. Under this programme, the flights, insurance and accommodation for the volunteers are paid, and the hosting unit also gets a small subsidy.

We applied with the Ministry to become a sending organisation and were accepted. This began in 2008, and every year before Covid, up to 18 young men and women were sent to Auroville under this scheme. From the beginning, a small team, including Thomas and Birgit from AVI Germany, took the responsibility for interviewing applicants before they came, making a selection, and interacting with them during their stay in Auroville, while Muna has been running the seminars to prepare them before they leave, as well as for reflection and review after their return.

During and after their experience, the volunteers had to write reports, and it was always touching to read what they got out of their volunteering time in Auroville. For many of them it changed their lives.

However, now we have decided to discontinue this programme. The reason is twofold. In Auroville the administrative hurdles have become so enormous that it is almost unmanageable for our very dedicated Auroville team. At the same time, fewer and fewer young people are applying for the programme. In the beginning we had up to 70-80 applications and we could select those we thought would get the most out of the experience and would cope best with the conditions in Auroville. Now we sometimes have only 15 or 16 applicants, and the minimum to keep the programme running is 15.

Why is this?

It is not a problem just for us but for all organisations sending volunteers abroad. My impression is that after Covid, young people don't dare to be so adventurous because they feel they have already 'lost' some years and now they feel they have to catch up and quickly concentrate on their further education. Also, perhaps – I'm just guessing, there are no surveys as far as I know – there are more fulfilling alternatives now in Germany and elsewhere for people who do not want a conventional career. One thing that attracted people to Auroville in the past was that this is a wonderful example of a place where you feel you can change the world, where you can heal the wounds of the past inflicted on the earth and on men and women. Perhaps now young people find fulfilling ways of doing this, of experiencing this, in their own society.

Concerning the present situation in Auroville, when people contact AVI Germany today asking for advice about visiting Auroville, what do you tell them?

Of course, we have to tell them that it is a difficult situation, we cannot paint a rosy picture, but when people want to visit, we still encourage them to come and make their own experience. However, now we cannot advise them to apply for Newcomer status because of the present unclear situation regarding visas etc. We have to be honest, we cannot encourage people like we used to do before.

What kinds of people still want to come here?

Sometimes it's people who are very disturbed by the situation in Germany, or in other parts of the West, and so have sometimes a rather naïve, escapist reason for wanting to come here. In these cases, we tell them that they need to fully inform themselves about Auroville's *raison d'être* and pay a longer visit before they consider settling in Auroville.

Has the present situation affected donations?

No, our members and friends still respond very generously to our calls. But we are also very concerned about the situation of Aurovilians who are forced to leave or feel that they have to leave, if only for some time, because the pressure is affecting them physically or psychologically. AVI is considering to develop a support network for them in our respective countries. There is also a suggestion that we start making contacts with intentional communities in our countries which might be willing to host Aurovilians or welcome them as members.

Do you feel that the present situation in Auroville is mirrored by, or representative of, a larger ferment in the world?

order to keep intact this point of harmony. Blessings. 29 March, 1966." (As related by Prakash Patel in an interview with Narad).

Taking a cue from this, if the representatives of the Governing Board and Aurovilian residents agree on some central issues and then slowly enlarge the agreement, maybe some progress at resolution could be achieved. For example, even the agreement to the statement made by The Mother above could be a starting point. Other starting points where all could agree might be "Auroville's uniqueness lies in its spiritual dimension", "Auroville's governance can be improved", "The progress of Auroville might be slower than one would have



Friederike

Absolutely. What strikes me more and more is that the situation in Auroville is not unique; it is obviously part of an evolutionary movement. Mother said that in Auroville we find the representation of all the difficulties of the world. In the past, it seems to me, we were imagining the evolutionary process as a slow and tedious but nevertheless continuous upward movement. Now my impression is that evolution has to be imagined rather like the ocean tides. Sometimes there is a big surge upwards and we ride joyfully on the waves, but in our enthusiasm we neglect or forget about certain things. Then a backward pull sets in and exposes all the forgotten and never confronted rubble, all that has now to be looked at. I think this is happening right now, both in Auroville and in the larger world, on an individual as well as on a universal level, and it seems to be a necessary process. The darker aspects and forces which have not yet been dealt with have to be exposed to sunlight. Even though it's a painful process, it seems to be a necessary one, as a preparation for the next upward surge.

In this context, I'm very happy to learn that Aurovilians are prepared to look into what has been neglected and not tackled in the past 50 years or so and what may have invited outside intervention. I think the only way to get through these difficult times is to firmly hold on to our deeper values, while heeding The Mother's advice to live from that inner aspect of our being which always remains untouched by all the outer turmoil.

Are you optimistic regarding the future, both in Auroville and the larger world?

Absolutely. While there is a lot of distress, and many young people around the world have this feeling of impending catastrophe, it also helps them turn to action. They feel that they have to do something about it, like participating in sustainable projects or in the Fridays for Future movement, because their parents' and grandparents' generation have left them with this mess. And they are right.

As I said before, this may be one of the reasons why there is not a stream of young people wanting to settle in Auroville right now, because there is a strong feeling that they have to become active where they are. I'm lucky to follow it fairly closely since my daughter is a biology teacher who was inspired by Auroville's ecological regeneration efforts since her schooldays and is now very engaged in bringing this pioneering spirit to her students. There are many wonderful young people, very conscious, very creative and very willing to turn the tide – pushing for the next upward surge. So I'm full of hope.

What about the future of Auroville International?

Of course, it sometimes worries me that only a few younger members are joining us grey-haired elders in the association, but our spirit is unbroken, our faith in the Mother's Dream and that it will become a reality one day is unshaken. And we are confident that we can continue to make an important contribution to Auroville's further development and to the wellbeing of its admirably brave citizens.

From an interview by Alan

LETTER

Dear Friends,

As Auroville goes through its worst crisis ever, it was relieving to see efforts from outside Auroville coming forward. Thus the compilation "Auroville in Crisis" by the "Auroville Global Fellowship" composed of people who are not residents of Auroville is a reminder that the success of Auroville is not just important for Aurovilians, but for humanity as a whole, because of its unique spiritual dimension. As an outsider, and also one who has never stayed in Auroville, and yet a strong well-wisher of its success, I only hope more recognition of the

importance of Auroville is recognised by the larger world before it is too late.

I would like to use this opportunity to make a possible suggestion for the resolution of the crisis without imposing any preconditions to the different sides. This is based on a statement of The Mother in 1966 when there were some discords in relation to the Lake Estate that was being developed at that time.

The Mother had written at that time: "*Lake Estate. It is only in harmonious collaboration that effective work can be done. The important thing is to find the point on which you can all agree – and after this is firmly established each one must be ready to yield his personal will in*

Leaving the comfort zone: Changing perspectives through the Weltwärts programme

Abishek, a youth from Annai Nagar village, recently spent 18 months volunteering in Germany, as part of the Weltwärtsprogramme.

AV Today: Tell me about yourself and how you got the sponsorship with the Weltwärtsprogramme to volunteer in Germany.

Abishek: My family is from Annai Nagar, but we moved to Pondicherry in 2005 for better education. My grandparents still live in Annai Nagar. My dad is a clothes designer at the Auroville unit Colours of Nature. I completed a Bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering because my father wanted me to, but I was drawn to social work. My mother, who is a social worker with Auroville Village Action Group, was my biggest inspiration. She always told me that we should work for the people, not just for money.

I started volunteering at Thamarai, an Auroville unit that works for youth in the surrounding villages, when I learned they were building a centre in Annai Nagar for education and youth development. I spent seven years as a volunteer and eventually became a paid facilitator. I help children with homework and various educational activities, and I lead playful maths classes. During college, I was also involved in other volunteer work, such as organising blood donation camps.

The opportunity to go to Germany came through Karin, a German woman introduced to me by Thamarai coordinator Bridget. Karin was looking for someone to participate in the Weltwärts social work exchange programme. I did an interview with her and was selected. I spent one and a half years in Stuttgart in Germany, working as a kindergarten teacher for two days a week and at a food NGO for three days a week. The NGO collected unsold food from supermarkets and distributed it to people in need, including refugees. I worked in different roles there, including distribution, cashier work, and office administration. I asked my boss to let me work in customer-facing roles so I could practice speaking German every day.

What were your first impressions of Germany?

It was a completely different world from India. I grew up in a nuclear family and had never really travelled beyond my region, so moving to Germany pushed me out of my comfort zone. Everything was new – culture, lifestyle, education, and the way people interacted. Living in Germany helped me grow personally. I travelled across Europe and learned a lot about different cultures and ways of thinking. It broadened my perspective in ways I never expected.

How did the reality compare with your expectations?

Before I went, people told me that Germans were very strict and serious, partly because of historical stereotypes. There's a common myth that Germans are like Hitler – telling others 'You should not do this, you should do that.' But the people I met were incredibly kind and welcoming.



PHOTO COURTESY ABISHEK

Abishek experiencing winter in Germany

My host family, for example, never treated me as a foreigner. They treated me like their own son, always including me in family activities and taking me to cultural events. That experience really changed my perspective on Germany.

What made you want to apply for this experience?

In India, there are a lot of family responsibilities – expectations to earn, take care of parents, and to follow a set path. I wanted to explore life independently, learn about different people, cultures, and perspectives. I also knew that staying in the same place wouldn't allow me to grow in the way I wanted. I needed to see the world beyond my hometown, and this opportunity gave me that chance.

Did you receive any training or support?

Yes, I received a lot of support in Germany. I attended around 30 seminars organised by Weltwärts, AVI Germany and DIZ, a German-Indian cooperation programme. These seminars covered

topics like German culture, politics, and the education system.

I also gave presentations in German schools and at an AVI Germany meeting, talking about cultural differences between India and Germany. It felt good to represent my background in that way.

How was it adjusting back to life in India?

It was difficult at first. In Germany, people live for themselves, and I had the freedom to live independently and focus on my own personal growth. But in India, life revolves around the family. When I returned, I had to readjust to family expectations and responsibilities. So it was a heavy burden at first. It's been ten months since I returned, but I've adapted now.

Have you applied any ideas from Germany to your work at Thamarai?

Yes, especially in education. I learned a lot about teaching techniques in Germany, especially in the kindergarten where I worked. I've introduced playful learning methods and better listening techniques at Thamarai.

What challenges do you see in your village, particularly regarding caste?

Personally, I believe everyone is equal, but caste discrimination still exists in many places. In some villages, people still ask about caste before considering someone for a job. When I encounter that, I don't respond directly – I ask them why they think it's important.

One of the biggest impacts of Thamarai is that it has helped break down some of these barriers. Before, people from other villages wouldn't come to Annai Nagar, but now they come to study and learn. That's a big step forward.

What are your long-term goals?

I want to become a full-time social worker. My goal is to do a master's degree in social work in Germany. That's why I'm preparing for my B1 German language exam in May. Once I finish my studies, I plan to work there for five to six years to gain experience.

After that, I want to return to India and start an NGO in Auroville, focusing on women's empowerment. In our village, things have started to change – girls can now study outside the village and even play sports, which wasn't allowed before. Nowadays we have a women's football team in the local school! But there's still a long way to go, and I want to contribute to that change.

In conversation with Lesley

REFLECTION

From spiritual refresher to living together

Those who have put forward the idea of a "Spiritual and Material Refresher programme" [a condition for living in Auroville mentioned in the Auroville Residents Criteria Standing Order, see AVToday # 425, January 2025, eds.] to be given at regular intervals to Auroville Residents have either – at worst – not read Sri Aurobindo's works or – at best – have only read them superficially.

The thought of Mother and Sri Aurobindo cannot be taught in a didactic, scholastic or catechistic way. The force that emanates from their words and writings is deposited within us in the silence of the mind and heart, when the receptacle is ready to receive it. When I first read a major work by Sri Aurobindo (*The Synthesis of Yoga*) in 1970, I could feel the power of the words pouring out with great peace into my whole being. I could mentally understand the meaning of the sentences, but that's not the most important thing; what's important is the contact with the transforming consciousness of Sri Aurobindo or Mother, which flows through their words and then does its own work in us – we just have to let it act. This can only happen in a personal relationship, not in a classroom or lecture hall, and certainly not in a spiritual re-education workshop run by Aurobindonian pseudo-priests dressed in white.

Sri Aurobindo and Mother always warned, even in the Ashram, against the temptation of certain disciples to turn their teachings into a religion. Spirituality, yes. Religion, no! Religion is all about indoctrination and enrolment, severe and authoritarian. Spirituality can only flourish in conditions of complete freedom.

Even if the source of the initial message was pure and luminous, almost all religions have subsequently diluted this message, turning it into an instrument of domination for the benefit of an oligarchy. And religion almost always ends up as nothing more than an amalgam of mechanical rites and empty, pointless pious similes. Spirituality, on the other hand, develops and blossoms in free discovery and inner joy.

Auroville is not an ashram, and its founder made it clear that the only condition for becoming an Auroville resident was goodwill. A number of Aurovilians first came to Auroville by chance, many having never read the writings of Sri Aurobindo or Mother beforehand, but the atmosphere of Auroville itself has induced many to read and study their works in more depth. Others are natural karmayogins and pursue their spiritual path through the consecration of their work. In any case, if you can't stand the pressure of the force-energy that bathes Auroville, you can't stay there and will eventually leave.

This unfortunate initiative – which is anything but refreshing – is imbued with provocative overtones, and is also accompanied by the announcement of a new Human Resources Department, as well as a battery of directives issued in a stern, reproving tone. A change of vocabulary doesn't necessarily lead to a change of reality, especially when the new name is borrowed from multinational corporations, where this department is generally the most hated, the people in charge being mostly accountants and technocrats with far more affinity for statistics and profit curves than for human beings.

As for the rules, if we examine them closely

and set aside their imperative tone, we have to admit that most of them have in fact always existed – but have not always been respected. Everyone knows, for example, that an Aurovilian undertakes to stay and work in Auroville. If one is absent, one must provide a reason – medical, family or professional – within the framework and benefit of the unit in which one works.

Everyone has also agreed that the property in which they live is the property of Auroville. You can't do as you please with it, rent it out to guests, or house friends and family without permission, as some have been known to do. And what if it was this laxity – or even "*je-m'en-foutisme*" – that had called for this severity of tone, as a clumsy and probably counter-productive response to the hope of putting things back in order and in their place?

In the current state of humanity in general and Auroville in particular, logical, humane, simple and clear rules ensure a certain order, thus fostering harmonious living together in the community.

However, people need to take responsibility and discipline themselves to follow these rules, without always trying to get around them. On the other hand, if new directives are continually issued and changed arbitrarily and suddenly at the whim of those in charge, this can only create stress and frustration, and can only lead to widespread confusion and disorder.

Without rules, we can only speak of non-divine anarchy. Divine anarchy, which Mother has evoked as an ideal of collective management, is not yet on the agenda, and can only be implemented by supramentalised beings, or at

least by the vast majority of citizens centred on and guided by their spiritual or psychic being. If we remain, as we do today, hopelessly on the mental plane, everyone thinks they hold the truth and will be right against all odds. This fatal trap leads people to turn against each other and use confrontation as the only means of communication. No harmony can emerge from this state of things.

Impermanence has always been the norm in the world, and we're discovering with anguish that today everything is increasingly unpredictable and unstable. Since it's an illusion to believe in any kind of security outside ourselves, it's time to remember that the true bedrock of stability lies within us, in the heart *chakra*, where the Divine has deposited its immortal presence. In any case, nothing is ever lost, and all life is lived.

For those who remain, the Great Adventure continues. For the others, they are enriched by the gift of experiences accumulated on this blessed soil, and will retain eternal gratitude for it, from life to life. The Divine Mother is behind all the events and happenings we encounter and, despite appearances and opposing winds, we must remain confident and certain that She knows better than we do what is best for our individual and collective development. Isn't that the one and only purpose of our presence in this world: progress?

Pragna and Shaktiprem

This reflection was first published in the News and Notes community edition # 1061 of 6 February, 2025.

The Heart's Pure Sight – an exhibition by Crystal

Set within Pitanga's tranquil backdrop, this exhibition invites visitors to explore the interplay between natural material and artistic expression. Crystal's work, executed on birch plywood, transforms a common material into a canvas that reveals both its inherent beauty and a deeper layer of meaning through deliberate artistic intervention.

At the core of Crystal's technique is pyrography - "writing with fire" - a method that engraves the wood's natural grain with intricate patterns. This process brings the birch's innate texture to the forefront, serving as both a foundation and a dynamic element of the composition. Layered upon these natural forms are mixed media elements: watercolours, ink, soft pastels, and bister (a natural brown pigment made from soot or wood ash), all enriched by accents of gold and copper. The resulting palette transitions from soft, earthy tones to more vivid reds and oranges, or even subtle hues of blues and pastels, suggesting a dialogue between the tangible qualities of the material and a more elusive, spiritual dimension.

One of the pieces in the exhibition uses the swirling grain of the wood to evoke the sense of moving water, with delicate lotus flowers emerging naturally from these patterns. The lotus, a recurrent symbol in Crystal's work, hints at themes of transformation and quiet spiritual insight. In this composition, the organic flow of the wood and the precise application of paint work together to blur the line between the



PHOTOS COURTESY CRYSTAL

structure. A graceful curve within the grain serves as a natural horizon, upon which a minuscule yet potent depiction of a setting sun is suggested through a careful interplay of colour and form. This piece underscores the artist's intention to use the material's natural characteristics as a guiding element in the overall narrative, transforming what might have been a mere detail into a prominent feature of the artwork.

The layered imagery, interwoven with recurring symbols such as circles, geometric patterns, and representations of nature, reflects Crystal's ongoing exploration of the mystical and spiritual aspects of life. The work does not overwhelm the viewer with complexity but rather encourages an introspective and thoughtful engagement - the intricacies invite one to step closer to the art piece and look at how the natural properties of wood can be harmoniously integrated with artistic vision. At its heart, this exhibition celebrates the beauty that arises when the natural world and creative vision merge in harmony.

Chandra



material and its interpretation, inviting viewers to engage with the work on multiple levels.

In another work, the natural grain takes a subtler role, receding into the background to allow the layered imagery to speak for itself. Here, the emphasis shifts to a carefully balanced composition where the inherent texture of the wood complements rather than competes with the painted elements. This approach highlights Crystal's thoughtful consideration of when to foreground the material's qualities and when to let symbolic elements take centre stage, allowing greater scope for more complex and detailed mandala artwork.

A third composition takes a more direct approach by fully embracing the wood's inherent



THE ARTS

Artists in Auroville – the current trends

Krishna Devanandan has a background as a dancer, cultural event organiser and teacher of Tai Chi. She helped organise the Auroville Film Festivals and managed the Auroville Art Service from its inception in 2012 until 2023, when the Auroville Foundation appointed new executives. Currently, she supports and publicises artistic expression in Auroville.

Auroville Today: What is the situation of the artist in Auroville today?

Krishna: In Mother's 'A Dream' of an ideal society, which many people believe is what Auroville should become, she wrote, *Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, would be equally accessible to all; the ability to share in the joy it brings would be limited only by the capacities of each one and not by social or financial position.*

However, the current policy of commercialisation has changed the situation of Auroville artists and of Auroville culture.

Before we examine this in more detail, tell us about the situation before that.

In the 1980s and 90s, art was not considered at all essential to the building of the city. In fact, it was looked upon as a 'hobby', not proper work, and the Entry Board would not allow anybody to become an Aurovilian who simply wanted to work as an artist.

At the same time, money was raised for cultural venues like the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, Kala Kendra, Multimedia Centre, Centre d'Art, Savitri Bhavan and CRIPA (Centre for Research in the Performing Arts). By giving permission for these places for artistic expression to exist, this meant that the community recognised artistic activities as being of value. But there was very little support for artists, who were expected to raise funds for their artistic *oeuvre*, work hard to produce and create, and raise the funds for exhibitions / publications / performances.

In 2010, however, as part of the Integral Sustainability Platform [see *Auroville Today* # 255, September 2010], a small group worked for 18 weeks on examining the situation of the arts in Auroville through the lens of Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's writings. One thing that became clear was that we needed a separate service for artists. Many artists work in isolation, struggling to do what they did and offer it to Auroville. Since they had no combined platform, it was easy to ignore their voices and the needs of this sector, even though there are more than 200 artists in Auroville.

We formed the Auroville Art Service in 2012 to make this sector known, to give it a

voice and provide artists with a common platform to contribute to the city. One of the ways we did this was through a website where you can find out who is doing what in this sector in Auroville and where it can be seen.

Also, we saw that a priority for artists was to be able to sell their work, so we started an artists cooperative that operated similar to an umbrella unit. Unintentionally, this gave recognition for the artists, because the governance structure here is such that you are recognised only when you have a registered unit: before that you do not 'officially' exist. Suddenly artists were legal entities and art became recognised work!

There were other consequences which hadn't been foreseen or planned. For example, when a new policy for activities was suggested, the artists vocalised their situation and requirements and this influenced the policy. So suddenly the artists were influencing the fabric of governance.

Is this the situation today?

No.

In April 2023, an Office Order was published which took over the management of the AV Art Service. The Office Order explained that they wanted to take over the effective utilisation and management of all the cultural venues. The result was that by 14 April all our emails at the Art Service had been blocked, and new executives had been announced.

The artists immediately recognised this as a takeover which could limit their artistic freedom. In fact, a few of them had experience of this happening in their home countries, where the arts have to conform to the political agenda of those in power.

The community saw this happening almost immediately with a children's play which was to be performed in Bharat Nivas, but the script had to be submitted for approval beforehand. It was considered 'anti-national' and therefore couldn't be performed in Auroville.

This was a like a hammer coming down and making its mark on the whole community – and not just the artists – because it told everybody that 'We' are watching you and 'We' will not let you express yourselves or use existing venues if

what you do is not acceptable to us.

Today, even other public spaces are being denied to us: social gatherings are allowed only in authorised locations, as yet undisclosed. And it is not just physical spaces. Digital spaces like the weekly News and Notes and Auronet have changed policies to disallow some users, and some publications have decided to self-censor; they have to be careful about what they print so that they can continue to exist.

Self-censorship is a sign of being in a totalitarian society, for in such a society you do not have to be told: you know how to behave and you behave in that way because you want to survive.



Krishna Devanandan

So access to the work of Auroville artists is being restricted today?

Absolutely, even though Mother's 'A Dream' clearly says that art should be freely accessible to everybody. Artists love to show their work, to share their work freely. But what happens, for example, if the Multimedia Centre's budget is cut and it has to pay its own way? How much longer will films be shown free for everybody to enjoy?

Or take CRIPA. This is a very unique cultural venue. In CRIPA, Aurovilians who are

offering performances for the community can utilise the high-end facilities for free, and admission to these performances is also free. This is much appreciated. It is the second most used cultural venue in Auroville, and in 2022-23 they had 72 performances there. So when the authorities threatened to cut its budget (which doesn't fully pay their expenses: they rely upon donations to keep running), it could have been the end of this unique experiment. Thankfully this did not happen. But even CRIPA has had to request users to contribute if possible because they need this to keep going.

Bharat Nivas is now the venue for government programmes and can be rented by private individuals. Unity Pavilion refuses to host Aurovilians who do not align with approved political views.

So how are Auroville artists viewed today by the authorities?

We can only draw conclusions from emails insisting that the activities registered under AV Art Service need to generate sufficient income or will be closed as 'hobbies'. When the current FAMC of the GB decided they would dismantle all the umbrella units, including that of the AV Art Service, they sent a letter only to the artists registered with AV Art Service saying that now they can choose to be a unit under a trust, but their activity has to pay their city services contribution and their health fund contribution, otherwise they will not accept it as a unit.

But this ignores the fact that some artists spend 1-2 years preparing work for a show or exhibition or making a film or writing a book, during which time they receive no serious income. And even if they manage to get some reimbursement later, for many of them it does not provide a regular income.

Such emails imply that the present governance structure does not recognise artists as being useful unless they generate substantial financial returns for the community: the only values now are commercial.

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Artists in Auroville – the current trends

continued from page 6

Now artists can't get a maintenance for their artistic work. They can only get a maintenance if they are doing a recognised 'job', like teaching. So people are being told they have no right to exist as artists because it is a hobby, not a worthwhile hobby, and they should do something more 'useful'.

One assumption is that if you control the sources of finance, you control the people who are dependent upon it. But no artist is doing what they are doing for a salary, and if somebody stops their salary, they won't stop doing their art. Artists will find another way of supporting themselves, because what you're talking about is human beings' need for self-expression. You can force somebody to hide this, to censor it, to keep quiet about it, but you can't stop it happening.

Artists are very sensitive to cultural shifts and they learn to go under the table when they sense repression, or else they decide to make their point in another way. Take the themes of plays in Auroville from 2021 to the present. Many of them make very sharp comments on power and politics, but these are plays by the likes of Shakespeare – and no one can call a Shakespeare play 'anti-national' or ban the production of plays like Richard the Third.

The artists are pushing back in other ways, too. They have objected to being forced into commercialisation. It has been pointed out that a book of poetry, for instance, is not a commercial product, and has a high cultural value. Some artists have been told that their work, which in one case included acting, was "not in line with the guidelines given by The Mother for Aurovilians". The artists have pointed out that the founding vision of Auroville, as articulated by The Mother, explicitly embraced artistic expression as an essential part of spiritual life. Sri Aurobindo wrote both poetry and plays (and plays need actors), and the Mother, a painter herself, loved music. It is indeed ironic that neither Sri Aurobindo nor The Mother would find a place in today's Auroville as the artists that they were.

What is the present situation with the AV Art Service?

The Art Service had been looked to by artists for certain facilities and services, and also by policymakers to find out what was going on in the arts. The executives who were appointed by the Auroville Foundation have since resigned. Out of personal interest, I keep a website on which a number of Auroville artists are registered and which produces a weekly newsletter which publishes all the artistic events which are happening. Any Aurovilian artist who wishes to be included can be featured on it.

For it has still not been understood what a huge force art is in Auroville. It is the harmony and the beauty that we want to bring as part of our individual search. And spiritually, when you start to talk about how to connect with the collective psychic being, it is through beauty, harmony, art. When you dry that out, you are in a desert.

This is why I believe that art and culture, along with unending education, are the primary things here, and these are two things which are still on track with what Mother expressed in her Dream. I'm really proud that Auroville is the only place you can go every evening to see a free film, all exhibitions and performances are also free (barring some at Bharat Nivas), and many workshops and classes are available free to Aurovilians.

And there is another reason why a vibrant cultural scene is important. Many countries in the world support the creation of artistic facilities and promote cultural cities because it draws the best talent. A city which has good cinemas, theatres and sports facilities attracts people, not just artists but other creatives like the entrepreneurs and innovators, and in this way it contributes to the prosperity of that city. This is what those who insist that art is just a 'hobby' or should be narrowly 'profitable' do not seem to understand. Rather than making Auroville more 'profitable', they are actually making us more poverty-stricken. Indeed, it is a vibrant and funded cultural scene that will enable this city to grow materially, socially and spiritually.

From an interview by Alan

The art of rule-breaking (for a happier life)

If the self-help genre had a naughty cousin who snuck a whoopee cushion under the seat of life's seriousness, *The Joy of Living Lightly* by Fif Fernandes would be it. This cousin coaxes the hesitant fun-makers to slink out the back door and blow bubbles, while everyone else meditates earnestly on their productivity hacks towards maximum self-optimisation.

The book's opening quote by Hollywood star Katherine Hepburn seems apt for the times: "If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun." Part manifesto, part how-to guide, and part playful disruption, this book is an unapologetic invitation to ditch the weight of perfectionism, laugh in the face of stress, and reclaim the sheer absurdity of being alive.

Aurovilian Fif Fernandes – medical clown, co-founder of MeDiClown Academy, laughter coach, theatre professional and expert mischief-maker – understands that most of us are drowning in obligations, self-imposed expectations, and the unrelenting pressure to be "better." Her antidote? Playfulness, irreverence, and the radical act of enjoying life before you hit burnout.

Chapters include breaking free from perfectionism, making self-care enjoyable instead of obligatory, and turning even the most mundane moments into playgrounds of possibility. The book is also peppered with personal stories, including professional disasters Fernandes transformed into triumphs through embracing humour, proving that joy isn't about a perfect life, but about finding laughter in life's imperfections.

This book is also about taking a stand. Against grind culture and the cult of busyness. Against joyless routines. Against the idea that laughter is a reward rather than a fundamental human right. Against the idea that fun is frivolous and that success comes at the cost of joy.

She argues that joy isn't just something we stumble upon; it's something we can cultivate with intention. So yes, there are practical exercises. But these are light-hearted alternatives to the common self-help prescriptions that feel like more work than relief. She encourages readers to create a "Laughter Bank Account", to withdraw joy daily, and turn their to-do lists into to-play lists. The "Joyful Self-Care Buffet" underlines that happiness isn't about grand transformations – it's about small, defiant acts of lightness in a world that often feels weighed-down. There's even a section on how to reclaim the lost art of play, not just for kids, but for the exhausted, over-cafeinated adults who forgot how fun life used to be. The author never claims to have all the answers, but she does offer readers permission to stop striving so hard and start enjoying life as it comes.

Lesley

The Joy of Living Lightly: Simple Secrets to Rediscover the Magic in Everyday Life with Less Stress and More Laughs, available at amazon.in. Price in India Rs 813.



Fif Fernandes with her book
The Joy of Living Lightly

Shipra Di

Shipra Di from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram passed away on 2 January at 2:35 pm in the Ashram Nursing Home.

Born in 1935, she spent her early years in Delhi and Shimla. In 1956, having completed her undergraduate studies in history, she started teaching at the Mother's School in New Delhi, which is where she met Chamanlal Ji, whom she married in 1962 with the Mother's blessings. The Mother gave permission to the couple to work in Australia for some years, where Chamanlal Ji worked with the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization), and where Shipra Di served as a librarian.

Her visit to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1968 was profound. She was tasked by the Mother to be part of the cooking team for delegates during Auroville's inauguration, and from that time she maintained a deep bond with Auroville. In 1972, she took up Pondicherry's invitations to join the Ashram and reside permanently in Pondicherry.

Shipra Di played a pivotal role in several organisations, including the early development of The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) in Pondicherry, establishing the solar energy unit in the Ashram, and serving as a founding member of the Keystone Foundation in 1993.

Shipra Di's exceptional work in documenting and disseminating research and experimentation in renewable energy earned her the reputation of being a "human google" long before the search engine was invented. With her remarkable memory and vast network, she could effortlessly connect people to ex-students, publications, or projects, providing the exact documentation, research, or information they needed.

For over two decades, she served as the key point of contact for the renowned Golconde building in Pondicherry. Architects, planners, and designers visiting the Ashram were treated to Shipra Di's personalised tours, enriched with captivating anecdotes about the building's history, along with insightful interpretations of its spatial design, materials, and architectural details. These tours inspired many visitors to feature Golconde in prestigious journals and author monographs about the building.



While she dedicated herself to supporting the complex technical and administrative work of Chamanlal Ji, Shipra Di was cherished for her warmth, hospitality, and remarkable ability to create a welcoming environment. Her home was a hub of inspiration, where she hosted distinguished personalities, JRD Tata, Eckhart Tolle, Dr. BV Doshi and many more, leaving a lasting impression on all who crossed her path.

Her vibrant and nurturing spirit touched countless lives, especially students, who continued to hold her in their hearts through the decades. She was a motherly figure to many, radiating kindness, grace and unconditional love throughout her remarkable journey.

Her cremation took place on 28 January at the cremation ground at Karuvadikupam, next to Muthialpet.

Don Kelman

Donald "Don" Kelman (91) passed away on 30 January 2025 at his home in the Parthana Community in Auroville. He had valiantly fought dementia for several years with the support of his loved ones and a community of dear friends. Don dedicated his life to the craft of teaching and to serving his community wherever he lived. Originally from Brooklyn, New York, he taught math and chemistry in the USA and Germany. Shortly after his return to the USA, he was granted a position in Kyoto, Japan, where he studied at a traditional art restoration workshop for several years. One thing led to another, and he embarked on a career at the prestigious Doshisha University as the head English teacher for their International High School, working with Japanese students who had returned from living overseas.

Upon retiring in 1988 after 30 years in Japan, he moved with his wife Marie-Ange to Auroville to start anew. He served in several areas, including the library, Pour Tous (PTDC), Entry Service and others, contributing tirelessly to the community for over 20 years before he was struck by various illnesses.

Don was a deeply social and warm-hearted person, known for the kindness and affection with which he addressed everyone. He



had an incredible ability to make people feel seen and valued, greeting each person with genuine warmth and enthusiasm. Whether sharing a story, offering advice, or engaging in long conversations over a cup of coffee, he always exuded a sense of ease and camaraderie. His love for classical music was well known, and many of his friendships were built on a shared appreciation for the arts.

His funeral took place on 31 January at the Auroville Burial Ground.

Joya Diane Skye

Joya Diane Skye left her body on 19 February. Born 13 April 1945, Skye (known as Diane from the early days), arrived in Auroville in May 1970 with her partner Philip and unborn child Lunaura. They stayed at the Ashram for the first three months and then moved to Aspiration where they participated in building the keel-roofed homes of that time, meditation, community building, tree planting amongst others.

Skye and Philip built what has come to be known as The Center Guest House in Center Field in 1976. They later built a Kindergarten next to the house to help provide a place for the children of Auroville to learn and play. This Kindergarten is still there today though the keel roof building has been replaced.

Skye was an international song writer with five gold records to her name in the USA. In Auroville, she was always ready to get creative, share her music, lend a hand or an ear.

When Skye was just 26, her heart stopped in a doctor's office and she had an 'after death' experience. She has always felt she would return "there" and "there" she felt "the greatest unconditional love".

She has always considered Auroville her home and the Divine her place of belonging. Skye sent her love to ALL of Auroville in her final hours.



Skye with her daughter Sunaura

Auroville Foundation (Residence Criteria) Standing Order 2024 challenged

The Working Committee appointed by the Residents' Assembly (RA-WCom) have published a legal opinion from lawyer Suchindran Bala Baskar as to the validity of the Auroville Foundation (Residence Criteria) Standing Order 2024 (AVFRC), which lays down certain criteria to be followed by the residents of Auroville [see AVToday # 426, page 2]. The opinion states that the Auroville Foundation Act has not given the Governing Board powers to issue standing orders; that standing orders can ordinarily only be issued in cases where there is an employer – employee relationship which is not the case in Auroville; and that, as the Office Order does not contain any guidelines for the exercise of discretion by those charged with its execution, the powers granted may be misused and impinge on the right to equality before the law and the right to life and liberty including the right to privacy. The legal opinion states that the Order is bordering on contempt of the Stay Order on the Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations, 2023 issued by the Madras High Court on 23 February, 2024. The opinion concludes that the issuing of the AVFRC Standing Order 2024 is *ultra vires* [beyond the legal powers given by, eds.] the Auroville Foundation Act, 1988 and unconstitutional due to the conferment of arbitrary and uncontrolled discretionary powers.

Admissions & Terminations Scrutinising Committee constituted

By Office Order dt. 20 February 2025, Dr. G. Seetharaman, Officer on Special Duty, Auroville Foundation, appointed the five members of the Admissions & Terminations Scrutinising Committee (ATSC) and the three members of the Admissions & Terminations Registry, in accordance with the Auroville Foundation (Admission and Termination of Persons in the Register of Residents) Regulations, 2023, issued by the Governing Board and published in the Gazette of India on 4 January 2024. The Office Order seems to ignore the order issued by the Madras High Court of 23 February 2024 which temporarily stayed these Governing Board regulations as they erode the powers of the Residents' Assembly to allow admission or termination of the persons in the Register of Residents. On 20 January, Newcomers and pre-Newcomers were called to a 'mandatory' meeting with members of the ATSC and members of the Governing Board approved Working Committee.

Evergreen land dispute

In two events in early February, residents visited the Auroville Foundation Office to express their deep concerns about the loss of Auroville land near Evergreen community and to request the Auroville Foundation Office to appeal the judgement in which ownership of the land, which had been in Auroville's ownership for 30 years, was passed to a property developer. On 3 February, over 100 residents peacefully visited the Auroville Foundation Office. On 6 February, a petition signed by 713 Auroville residents and well-wishers from around the world requesting the Auroville Foundation to appeal the judgement was handed over to the Auroville Foundation Office, with soft copies sent to the Education Minister, to the Governing Board, and to the International Advisory Council. It was later found out that the Auroville Foundation finally appealed the judgement on the last day possible. Meanwhile, the property developer claiming the land has completely denuded it and made it ready for luxury villa plots.

More trees cut

On 29 January, a member of the Auroville Town Development Council constituted by the Governing Board (GB-ATDC) verbally informed community members that it now "had permission to increase the Outer Ring Road (ORR) to 30 meters wide". On 3 February 2024, workers began cutting trees along the ORR, and continued cutting in the following weeks. The Town Development Council constituted by the Residents' Assembly (RA-TDC) has sent a letter to numerous state and central government officials, cataloguing the destruction.

Road construction problems

The construction of the Crown Road, ORR and various radials is running into problems as a number of private, temple or Poramboke (government) lands, which are necessary to complete the envisioned urban plan, have not yet been purchased. On the 4km-long Crown and some radial roads, the non-ownership of vital plots of private land has delayed the completion of the road, and the majority of the land needed for the ORR does not belong to Auroville, with some of it located inside local villages. The newly constructed roads are alleged to be of poor quality and to have inadequate provisions for rainwater runoff.

Deviation from the Auroville Master Plan (Perspective 2025)

The RA-TDC informed the community that on 27 January it had sent a letter to high government officials addressing ongoing concerns about non-compliance by the GB-ATDC and the Central Public Works Department which executes the road building in accordance with the Auroville Master Plan (Perspective 2025). Key issues highlighted include violations of the Auroville Foundation Act, lack of updated development plans, poor environmental planning, irregularities in road construction, and significant financial and ecological losses. The letter calls for an immediate halt to projects, a review of the Master Plan, adherence to participatory governance, and environmental clearances to safeguard Auroville's principles and ecological integrity.

Housing takeovers

In January 2025, all of the volunteers and guests who were staying in Mitra Youth Hostel were asked to leave in order for the Auroville Foundation Office to house a group of 27 financial auditors. The youth were accused of being "not mindful of the Peace Area" and of alcohol and substance abuse although no evidence was given for this. Initially such housing takeovers took place only in relation to Government-of-India-funded assets, such as units at Maitreya and Harmony (SAIER's newly-built staff quarters), but more recently have occurred with houses that had been constructed with private funding. This is causing increased pressure amidst Auroville's existing housing crisis.

Youth Centre clarifies

The Auroville Youth Center has sent out a mass bulletin to all residents stating that the Youth Center is a place of learning, exploration and personal growth for youth of all kinds and ages and that it has recently started to work closely with the community, creating various workshops such as welding, woodwork, kombucha making, mushroom cultivation; with more to come. To finance these learning activities the Centre has been holding pizza nights every weekend. The Centre clarified that these evenings aim to encourage community bonding, youth integration and involvement, and the sharing of joy and fun. It stated that its internal security is watchful and ensures that the evenings do not devolve into a "party place", ensuring that no alcohol, tobacco, and illegal and unethical behavior are present. All events and activities in the Youth Center end by 10pm sharp, with no exceptions.

Revised mandate of Residents' Assembly Service approved

On 11 February it was announced that Auroville's Residents' Assembly (RA) has approved the revised mandate of the Residents' Assembly Service. 359 residents of Auroville voted online and in-person, with 355 votes in favour and 4 against. The number of participants exceeded the 10 per cent quorum required to validate an RA decision (239 votes), as according to the Master List data, the total adult population of our community eligible to participate in RA decision making is 2388 as of the month of February 2025. The new mandate expands the role of the RAS beyond organizing meetings and vote counting to a broader function of supporting community decision-making, communication and coordination, with members appointed for three-year extendable terms.

GB-FAMC challenged

The RA-WCom has challenged the authority of the GB-FAMC which it described as "a group of individuals attempting to impose control over the rest of the community when it has not been selected by the Residents' Assembly and does not respond to calls of collaboration or transparency." The RA-WCom stated that the functioning of the GB-FAMC as a Committee of the Governing Board is not in accordance with section 16.2 of the Auroville Foundation Act as only GB members can vote in a committee constituted by the Governing Board of which they are a member. The challenge was issued in response to a mass bulletin issued by the GB-FAMC on 14 January in which it claimed to be the sole authority for the appointment of executives and managers.

Legal updates

The RA-WCom has shared with the community an update about recent activities and hearings in the Supreme Court in New Delhi and in the Madras High Court.

1) An appeal on the Quo Warranto order of 1 August 2024 concerning the membership of the Working Committee was submitted by its lawyers in the Madras High Court on 4 February 2025. The appeal has been accepted for debate and a notice has been issued to the other party to respond within two weeks.

2) There have been a number of hearings in the Supreme Court on the appeals of the Auroville Foundation (represented by the Secretary) against the National Green Tribunal order of April 2022 and against the order of the Madras High Court on TDC matters issued on March 2024. All arguments in both

cases are now closed and reserved for judgement. The final rulings are awaited.

3) A writ petition filed by an Aurovilian on land exchange has been listed in the Madras High Court.

15th Auroville marathon

Run for the Joy of Running, the 15th Auroville Marathon, took place on Sunday, 16 February 2025. Over 3,300 runners from across the world, each carrying their own unique story, determination, and love for running, participated in the full, half and quarter marathons.

Auroville choir performs



PHOTO: RAKHAL

On 15 and 16 February, the Auroville Choir, conducted by Nuria, presented songs composed by Ola Gjeilo, Elaine Hagenberg, James Eakin, Eric Whitacre, Jacob Narverud, Don Macdonald, Christopher Tin and Jake Runestad. The performance was titled *Hope*, in keeping with the theme of all the songs.

Matrimandir Wealth Garden opens



PHOTO: COURTESY MATRIMANDIR


As an offering to the Mother on Her Birthday, the Wealth Garden, one of the 12 gardens of the Matrimandir, was opened on 21 February. The flower of the Wealth Garden is the Water Lily, which Mother named "Wealth". Mother's Comment on the Wealth Garden: *True wealth is what one offers to the Divine*.

Humility '25 Festival

In the birthday week, the Auroville Foundation hosted the Humility '25 Festival, an eight-day celebration that embodies the essence of humility. The Festival explored the Four Powers of The Mother followed by attributes of psychological growth in the principles of The Mother's symbol. The highlights included daily Matrimandir concentration sessions, knowledge sharing, workshops and readings, cultural shows and cuisine events. The Foundation invited participants from schools, colleges and institutions to learn about Auroville's international culture, spirituality and vision.

Birthday week events

Among other events happening during the Auroville birthday week there was a Bansuri flute recital offered by Aurovilian Chandra in the Matrimandir amphitheatre on Mother's birthday, 21 February. A composition by Aurovilian Holger Jetter on the four great aspects of The Mother for piano, guitar, flute, four string instruments and solo dance, was performed at Cripa on 22 February. A collective dance offering for the birthdays of The Mother and Auroville called Divya Shakti (Divine Power) took place on 25 February at the Matrimandir amphitheatre, involving 20 Indian classical dancers (Odissi, Bharat Natyam, Kathak) and Kalaripayattu practitioners, including Aurovilians, Ashramites and professional artists, who danced on recorded music played by 30 musicians from India, Europe, Russia, USA, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and Auroville. From 21 to 23 February, a Mini Film Festival focusing on films from the Middle East countries took place at the Multimedia auditorium. The festival featured films from Iran, Tunesia, Lebanon, Algeria and Jordan.

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