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VOICE OF AUROVILLE

News & Highlights from the Auroville Community



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Cover image: Earth excavated for the Matrimandir lake, April 2024

Closing image: Auroville's 50th anniversary, 28th February 2018

— Introduction

About us

Voice of Auroville is a quarterly journal to inform wellwishers and friends of Auroville across India and the globe on the current unfolding events with **factual updates** and **articles**. The contents convey perspectives from Auroville's Residents' Assembly (one of the Auroville Foundation's three statutory bodies).

What is Auroville?

Founded in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa, known as the Mother, Auroville is an international project based on the vision of the great sage and philosopher Sri Aurobindo. This unique experiment in human unity attracts seekers and visitors from all over India and the world. You can find a quick introduction to Auroville in the first issue of *Voice of Auroville*, by visiting auroville.media/voa or by scanning this QR code.



“Conditions for living in Auroville

From the psychological point of view, the required conditions are:

- (1) To be convinced of the essential unity of mankind and to have the will to collaborate for the material realisation of that unity;
- (2) To have the will to collaborate in all that furthers future realisations.

The material conditions will be worked out as the realisation proceeds.”

The Mother,
19th June 1967



— *Introduction*

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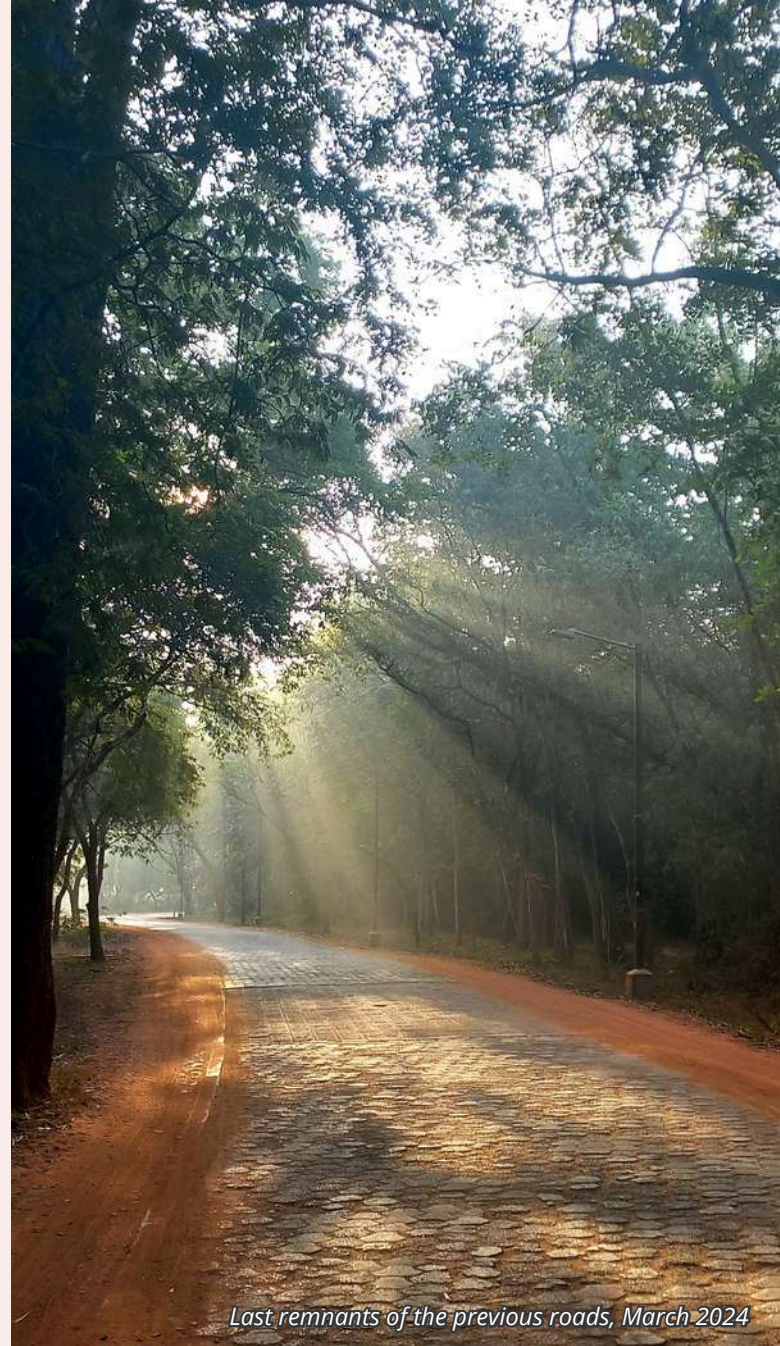
Devastation continues in Darkali Forest Park, May 2024

Editorial Note

Glimmers through the Storm?

As many of our readers know, Auroville, the longest-standing experimental city dedicated to human unity, faces an existential threat. For 56 years, Auroville has thrived through the collaboration of its multicultural community, national and international supporters, and institutions like UNESCO, the Government of India, and foreign foundations. This synergy has made Auroville the largest and most diverse intentional community in the world, with over 3,300 residents from 60 nations. Though not without flaws and with much progress still needed, Auroville has evolved into a unique and vibrant project.

However, since 2021, the appointment to the Auroville Foundation of a new Governing Board and its Secretary has brought on an administrative, financial, and ideological takeover. Despite resilient community responses and significant national and international support, this takeover continues.



Last remnants of the previous roads, March 2024

In this sixth issue of *Voice of Auroville*, we explore some of Auroville's contributions to local bioregional development and report on the latest developments in the ongoing crisis, including some encouraging news - glimmers through the storm. Thanks to everyone's perseverance, hope remains. We trust readers of this issue will hold onto this hope and continue to support Auroville during these challenging times.

***Voice of Auroville editors,
June 2024***



Spotlight

Bioregional development: aspiring to a sustainable future for all

Since its inception, Auroville has made diverse efforts in the neighbouring villages and bioregion to weave together a common aspiration for human unity through community development. The aim is to bring together all sections of society, irrespective of caste, cultural background, gender and nationality, through a participatory and integral approach.

Auroville now anchors over 50 bioregional community development initiatives in the fields of environment, education, health, social enterprise, financial inclusion, infrastructure, capacity building, leadership and cultural preservation.

Building on local wisdom

At Auroville's start, the designated area was considered a "most backward area in need of development" by the Tamil Nadu Government. Nonetheless, the pioneering community depended heavily on the wisdom and site-specific knowledge of the local communities. It was, for example, with their help that the indigenous forest and traditional rainwater harvesting in communal tanks were revived over the years. The Mother, founder of Auroville, was particularly attentive that the relationship between Auroville and the surrounding populations should be "a true human fraternity".

— *Bioregional development*

As Auroville has grown, it is in this spirit that the number and scope of projects and services shared between Auroville and its neighbours have developed. While the standard of living and range of opportunities in the villages around Auroville have certainly increased, new challenges continue to arise, and the need for collaborative bridges connecting hearts and aspirations is as important as ever.

Current challenges

In recent years, the expansion of the tourism sector and rapid economic and population growth in neighbouring Pondicherry has increasingly spilled over to the areas around Auroville, causing issues related to land speculation, unplanned development, waste management, over-exploitation of water resources, destruction of the regenerated forest, traffic congestion, air pollution, and safety - all affecting the wellbeing of the entire area. Inevitably, we will all reap the bounty or consequences of how we relate to one another and to our natural world. Forging the right way forward with the entire bioregion will require strong relationships and trust.



Stitching an eco-pad for Eco Femme



Eco Femme menstrual education event

The bridges we've built

Auroville's bioregion-focused initiatives have been a co-created effort with much learning by all involved. Most of these ventures concentrate on a specific thematic area or activity. Some are pioneering models for living in rural India and the world. They are for the most part functionally autonomous projects initiated by inspired individuals who have seen a need and acted upon it.

Several of these projects are in partnerships with the Tamil Nadu government. A number are funded through donor agencies and Auroville's generous network of international donors. A handful aim to be self-sufficient, running largely on income earned through activities intended for that purpose.

— *Bioregional development*



Community development and sustainable livelihoods

Today, more than 30% of registered Auroville residents hail from the surrounding bioregion. In addition, over 6,000 people from the bioregion are employed in the various sectors of Auroville, and have access to financial and educational opportunities for their children and themselves. Auroville employees also benefit from 'SEWA', a savings scheme that provides them with a gratuity account, zero-interest education loans, regular salary increase, and an accident cover policy. Many undergo training to gain useful professional skills and are then able to establish their own services and enterprises. A number of Auroville enterprises consciously create employment opportunities specifically for local women to improve their livelihoods, health, and learning vistas. Similarly, several technology sector enterprises create opportunities for local youth to earn a fair wage while gaining advanced competency through on-site job training.

Health and well-being

Health services and camps for the villages surrounding Auroville began in 1969 with a dispensary and a basic clinic in a thatched hut. Today, comprehensive primary health care and preventive care services are provided to a local population of about 20,000 through regular medical and dental checkups for adults and school children with provision of essential medicines and nutritional advice.

Environment

From the early years in Auroville, the focus on erosion-control, reforestation, regenerative agriculture and water harvesting ultimately transformed the area from a red desert into a green haven. As many projects developed, the knowledge gained through this and on-going research has been transferred to the bioregion and further afield, becoming a model for green practices in India and abroad.



— *Bioregional development*

Education

Based on the principles of Integral Education, Auroville's educational initiatives aim to be guided by the insight that humans are born with a unique physical, social, and spiritual identity which unfolds and develops through a conscious and ongoing interaction between 'nature' and 'nurture'. [Five of the outreach schools serving children from the bioregion are highlighted in the article *Evolving Approaches to Integral Education in Voice of Auroville*, Issue 04.]

Culture and arts

Cultural centres offer opportunities for expressions of local cultural identity, and connect Auroville and its bioregion by providing opportunities to study traditional arts, crafts, music, dance, sports, cooking, and natural remedies.

Sports

A regional sports association links Auroville and 20 surrounding villages, aiming to foster unity and skill development through a programme of sports grounds and facilities, including coaching for regular competitions at local, regional and national levels. Building on Mother and Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on physical education as an essential component of growth, Auroville's outreach schools offer a variety of sports and physical development activities, and sporting events are organised that enable bridge-building across different villages and settlements as well as strengthening the connections between Auroville and its neighbours.



WasteLess educational initiative

— *A sampling of Auroville's work with direct impact on the region*

There are 13 villages in the immediate area of Auroville, comprising about 40,000 people, and approximately 40 villages in the larger bioregional area.

Auroville Village Action Group

AVAG began over 40 years ago in response to a complex set of local and wider conditions that result in gender inequity, poverty and limited access to resources for development. Its reach now extends across 40 villages, directly impacting the lives of over 5,000 women, 1000 youth, and 3,000 children through participatory community development, economic development, capacity building, and psycho-social support. The component programmes offered by AVAG include: micro-finance, collective work initiatives, psycho-social and physical health initiatives, environmental awareness, livelihood and social enterprise development, expansion of legal access for women and children confronted with human rights abuses, caste integration, exchange programmes, and exposure trips.



Eco Femme

Founded in 2010, this women-led social enterprise makes washable cloth pads and nappies and promotes menstrual practices that are healthy, dignified and eco-friendly. The organic-certified cloth products are stitched by a women's group in the bioregion. Their Pad for Pad programme offers girls in rural India cloth pads donated through international sales, while Pads for Sisters provides pads at cross-subsidised rates to Indian women. The enterprise also works with girls, women and NGOs to deliver menstrual education, exploring taboos and teaching responsible practices. To date, EcoFemme has sold and distributed more than 1.3 million pads, saving 103 million disposable pads from ending up in landfills, and it has reached over 90,000 girls and women through its educational programme.

WELL Paper

This Women Empowered through Local Livelihood (WELL) project started in 2005 as a local tsunami rehabilitation response. WELL Paper grew to become a working model for social enterprise development combining product design, production, sales and training programmes. Today, after years of experience, WELL women teach social enterprise development and eco-handicraft skills to other social organisations around India. The WELL women are organised as independent profit-sharing groups earning income according to quality of performance and group progress. The leading vision is empowerment and ecological awareness implemented through social values.



WasteLess

WasteLess is an organisation that develops innovative educational programmes about sustainable consumption and waste management. Elements from their curricula have been incorporated into Tamil Nadu's official syllabus and science textbooks. In 2022, the Sea Change programme on marine plastic pollution was launched in 200 Tamil Nadu government schools, and has now reached 13,500 students.



SVARAM

Initiated in 2003 as a local income generation project, SVARAM - Musical Instruments and Research has been recognised by the UN's Music as a Global Resource Initiative as one of its first 50 projects worldwide. It started with the two founders teaching a small group of unemployed local youth basic music tuning systems and carpentry skills and then exploring with these youth how to make and repair sound producing instruments of different kinds. Today Svaram is a co-managed association with 86 largely local employees. Its production unit manufactures sound instruments that are sold in over 30 countries. Many of the unique instruments are co-created in a shared process. SVARAM runs courses, training programmes, and visits to its Auroville workshop and Sound Garden; its sound gardens, pathways and other large sound installations can be found in public and private spaces around India.



Auroville Health Centre

The Auroville Health Centre is recognised as a Mini-Health Centre by the Tamil Nadu Government and provides medical care, laboratory facilities and a pharmacy for Auroville, the bioregion, and visiting guests alike. A mobile team of local women trained as health workers also visit six village sub-centers offering primary health care, traditional medicines and natural therapies.

Auroville Dental Centre

Auroville has had its own dental clinic for the last 40 years. Qualified dentists offer comprehensive treatment at the main clinic, while local women provide basic screening and education on oral hygiene and preventive care at 10 sub-centres in the area. Every year 1,400 school students from 17 schools around Auroville and 1,850 patients from the bioregion are treated. Tooth decay among the children has reduced from 90% to 50%.

Aurokiya Integral Eye Centre

Aurokiya offers a primary eye care centre, outreach camps in the bioregion, school and workplace screening programmes, awareness activities to promote eye wellness and classes in eye yoga. This is a fairly recent endeavour started by a third generation Tamil Aurovilian who headed the administration of Aravind Eye Hospital in Pondicherry for 12 years, receiving numerous awards and international recognition for his work. He founded Aurokiya in 2021 to focus on preventive eye care and prevention of blindness in Auroville and the bioregion.



The Auroville Health Centre in Kulapalayam



A consultation at the Auroville Dental Centre



Aurokiya eye health screening



Pitchandikulam Forest information panels



Pitchandikulam Forest team members and employees



School programme at the Auroville Botanical Garden

Pitchandikulam

Started over 50 years ago, this forest sanctuary is dedicated to community and environmental initiatives that restore the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest biosphere and the life supporting, enduring bond between Tamil people and their natural surroundings. Pitchandikulam supports: environmental education across 100 bioregion schools; an indigenous medicinal plant programme involving conservation, education, treatment, and social enterprise; and restoration ecology in the immediate bioregion and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

Botanical Garden

The 50-acre Botanical Garden started in 2000 with a 10-acre Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest plantation for conserving native vegetation. Its Environmental Education Programmes began several years later. The Garden hosts school children, local women's groups, and teacher groups for educational visits and camps, reaching over 3500 individuals annually from the local region and across India. Additional programmes are open to Auroville residents and participants worldwide.

To celebrate Auroville's 50th anniversary, protected green spaces were created in 55 neighbouring schools, increasing greenery in the children's environment and fostering a bond with nature. The team also implements eco-landscaping, mine eco-restoration, and conservation and research projects. It has completed over 30 re-afforestation projects in India.



Kolam creation at the Mohanam Centre

Auroville Institute of Applied Technology

AIAT has provided certified vocational training to more than 2700 bioregion youth since 2004. It now offers a full-fledged Bachelor of Vocation degree programme in affiliation with Pondicherry University.

Life Education Centre

Founded in 1991, LEC focuses on education and empowerment of women in the Auroville bioregion through vocational, functional and social skills development grounded in local culture and traditions. It has provided a supportive learning space for over 500 local women seeking continued personal growth and peer connection. Their desire to financially support themselves and their families inspired the development of Sakhi, a social enterprise producing beautiful handmade items.

Mohanam Village Heritage Centre

A group of local youth created Mohanam 20 years ago. Mohanam organises varied educational, art, craft, and cultural programmes with children, youth, and women to keep local artistic traditions alive. These include dance, music, theatre arts, and martial arts. The Centre also operates a kindergarten, supports women's empowerment through training in leadership, self defence, and other skills, and brings local youth together to engage in varied community development activities.

Endangered Crafts Mela

For the past five years, this annual event has helped inspire and introduce school-age children from Auroville and the bio-region to many local, traditional and endangered crafts and performance arts. Over the course of an immersive, experiential week, artisans, craftspersons and performance artists from around Tamil Nadu share their skills, stories, heritage, and passion for continuing the crafts and arts that have shaped their lives.



Endangered Crafts Mela



Trucks moving earth mountains excavated for the Matrimandir lake, May 2024

Current Crisis

Summary of events February to May 2024

The aggressive takeover of Auroville - which started nearly three years ago after the appointment of a new Governing Board and its Secretary, Dr Jayanti Ravi - continues unabated. Previous issues of Voice of Auroville have covered events through January 2024, a summary of which can be found here:

www.auroville.media/crisis.

Recent happenings in Auroville continue to be alarming and distressing, and stand as testimonies to the deliberate attempt

to supplant Auroville's founding principles - led by the systematic takeover of the Auroville Foundation by its Governing Board, its Secretary (also called 'Auroville Foundation Office' or **AVFO**) and their appointees. However, despite the AVFO's efforts at financial, institutional and ideological appropriation of Auroville, there are glimmers of hope. Here is an overview of events from February to May 2024, including some encouraging developments.

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Encouraging news from the courts

In recent months, the Madras High Court has recognised the right of the Residents' Assembly and its committees in three different court cases. One of these concerns the residents' right to appoint their own representatives in the Working Committee; another upholds the Residents' Assembly's role in the admission and removal of residents; and yet a third relates to the constitution of Auroville's Town Development Council. Regrettably, the AVFO has repeatedly appealed fair judgements from the Courts which offered the opportunity for mutuality and collaboration in the true spirit of Auroville.

Judgements recognising the Residents' Assembly's right to appoint its own representatives

Due to the Secretary's persistent efforts to halt the proceedings of the Residents' Assembly and disregard its authority, several cases were filed in the Madras High Court.

A first court case sought the recognition of the Working Committee selected by the Residents' Assembly, and more generally the legitimacy of the Residents' Assembly. In August 2022, a judgement on this case was issued by the Madras High Court, recognising the legitimacy of the Residents' Assembly, and further emphasising that all three authorities of the Auroville Foundation should work in mutuality, in the true spirit of Auroville. This judgement was immediately appealed by the AVFO and an interim stay on this judgement was ordered by the appeal bench of the Madras High Court in the same month. Since then, the matter has gone through a number of hearings. In September 2023, the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court issued a modification of the interim stay, affirming that the Residents' Assembly is a statutory body and therefore cannot be interfered with by any external officer, authority or other entity. Although the case hasn't been fully settled, and the Secretary and her appointees consistently ignore the orders of the court, this interim verdict brought some much needed relief to the residents of Auroville.



Ongoing digging for the Matrimandir lake, April 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*



In January 2024 the AVFO and Governing Board published in the Gazette of India two new regulations. One of these was aimed at controlling who would be in the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly, effectively denying once more the residents' statutory right to appoint their own representatives. The other regulation attempted to grant the Governing Board the powers to appoint members in a "scrutinising committee" which would deal with the admission of new Auroville residents, and the removal of existing Auroville residents. This would give the AVFO full control over who is permitted to reside in Auroville, and thus over the composition of the Residents' Assembly - a clear overreach. [See detailed report in *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 05.]

New cases were filed by residents and their Working Committee to invalidate these new regulations. The Madras High Court ordered an interim stay on 23rd February, pointing out that the new regulations contradicted the Auroville Foundation Act and should therefore be put on hold for the time being. Further hearings are pending. In the meantime, the residents' rights to appoint their own representatives in the Working Committee, in the Admissions Committee (aka Entry Board) and in the Termination Committee (aka Exit Review Committee) is protected, which gave some hope and relief to the Residents' Assembly. Nonetheless, in spite of the court orders, the AVFO still refuses to recognize these committees of the Residents' Assembly, ignoring all efforts at communication and dialogue. The AVFO also continues to undermine these groups' ability to function, by withholding all financial resources and budgets - generated through community funding.

Judgements on the Town Development Council

On 15th March, the Madras High Court struck down as illegal the Standing Order issued in 2021 by the AVFO, which had reconstituted the Town Development Council (TDC) without any Residents' Assembly consultation. Previously, 11 of the 13 TDC members were selected directly by the Residents' Assembly.

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

The High Court judged that the AVFO's recent Standing Order was not in line with the Auroville Foundation Act of 1988, nor with the Auroville Master Plan (Perspective 2025). The verdict stated that the Governing Board had appropriated the entire powers of the Residents' Assembly for itself in the Standing Order, and had virtually nullified the Residents' Assembly's existence and role vis-à-vis the Master Plan. The Court stated that it will be open for the Governing Board to frame fresh regulations in tune with the provision of the Act - and, for the time being, that the 2021 Standing Order is invalid. Again, this judgement emphasised the need for mutuality and collaboration.

In accordance with this judgement, the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly and the Town Development Council of the Residents' Assembly drafted new regulations, which were presented to the Auroville community for feedback prior to future submission to the Governing Board for approval. These draft regulations emphasise the complementary role to be played both by the Residents' Assembly and Governing Board in matters related to the Town Development Council.



Pipes used for Crown road infrastructure, April 2024

Unfortunately, the AVFO chose to challenge the Madras High Court verdict by appealing to the Supreme Court. On 29th April 2024, the Supreme Court handed down an interim judgement which put a stay on the earlier verdict from the Madras High Court. While the earlier Madras High Court verdict is not nullified, it is paused until further orders, which is viewed by many as a real setback. Further hearings on this matter are planned for the month of July.

The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly has stated that the 'TDC' reconstituted by the AVFO acts in total defiance of earlier Residents' Assembly decisions, and the residents' advice or well-being; fully ignores environmental and sustainability concerns and accomplishments, even though they are one of Auroville's biggest strengths in an increasing planetary crisis; does not respect national and international standards in terms of planning and development; misuses funds generated by the residents of Auroville without their consent; and violates the values and ideals of Auroville. These appointees of the AVFO have indeed spearheaded most of the ecological and material destruction in Auroville since December 2021.



Tree cutting under AVFO directive, April 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Ecological crisis intensifies

Matrimandir lake

stirs deep concerns

In April 2024, concerned residents of Auroville circulated a petition requesting a halt of the excavation of the Matrimandir Lake and proposing an integrated development process. The petition highlighted a deep concern about the possible negative environmental impact of a lake of such depth and the effect this will have on the surrounding villages. It stated, “We believe that it is possible to fulfil Mother’s guidelines for the lake in an environmentally sensitive, humanely inclusive, beautiful, and timely manner.” It concludes, “By pausing the ongoing work and considering all options, we can ensure a solution that reflects the values of Auroville and the wishes of the wider community.”

The next day, the Matrimandir executives publicly responded to the petition, stating it contained fundamental errors regarding the impact of the lake, and they were determined to continue the excavation work as planned. Despite residents sending another letter in response to this declaration, the Matrimandir executives refused to engage in further dialogue.

The present lake plan is based on a very simple lake drawing signed by Roger Anger, the chief architect of Auroville, in 2005. This drawing states the lake depth as “at least 2m” and shows a few peninsulas and an island - all absent in the ongoing plan. The concern of many community experts is that this original drawing obviously lacks sufficient research data and design details to be considered a final drawing to be executed.

When the petition, supported by over 450 residents, was handed over to the Matrimandir executives, they refused to engage in any dialogue with the delegates.



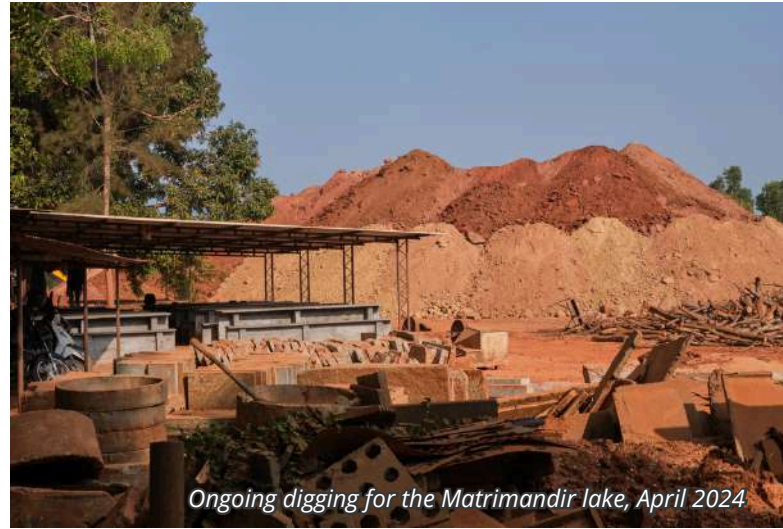
Ongoing digging for the Matrimandir lake, April 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Because of the concerns about the design and implementation of this project, a dedicated Matrimandir Lake Task Force had been formed by expert residents and endorsed by the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly in December 2023, in order to prepare an alternative lake design that addresses relevant concerns expressed by the community, while integrating elements of the current plan and ongoing work. The aim was to create an integral lake development plan appropriate to long-term, sustainable water resource management for Auroville and the surrounding bio-region. The Task Force briefed the acclaimed Indian landscape architect Mohan Rao and his team, who then drafted a first design proposal. On 29th April the proposal video was shared with the Matrimandir executives and the lake team, who replied to residents that they welcome the initiative and proposal of collaboration with the condition that the existing plan must remain as it is - de facto denying any form of true collaboration.

The Working Committee has also recently written to the Matrimandir Executives to suggest that a third party technical panel be invited to assess the ongoing lake project as a means to move forward in an inclusive and more professional manner. This proposal was rejected.

In the meantime, work continues at Matrimandir. A tall hill of excavated earth has been piled within the premises. Some



of this soil has been used to level the sides of the Crown road, and other large amounts have been transported to private lands owned by the Pvt. Ltd. company of Michael Bonke, a major donor behind the Matrimandir lake's funding and execution. The Matrimandir team has stated that this will be used to form a large artificial hill approximately 2 km to the northeast of the city. As the site for that hill has not yet been secured, the Matrimandir team states that the "waste of time, energy and money" involved in moving the earth twice is "unavoidable". Again the community has not been consulted in the process and its concerns are ignored.

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Tree cutting continues despite questionable legality

Widespread and excessive tree cutting and clearing has continued along parts of the Crown, Outer Ring and Radials that go through Auroville settlements and carefully reforested lands. As reported in our last edition, in December 2023 the Supreme Court placed an 'interim stay' on the National Green Tribunal (NGT)'s 2022 verdict, following an appeal by the AVFO. This 'stay' has been interpreted by the AVFO as a licence to indiscriminately destroy whole sections of Auroville. [See *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 05]

For instance, in the Darkali Forest Park [See *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 02], contractors engaged by the AVFO have widened the Crown road beyond the 9.1 metre width that was recommended in the Joint Committee report ordered by the NGT. In the process, workers have piled large amounts of soil around some of the remaining trees, up to a height of 1.5 metres, which will likely suffocate and kill the trees. In several areas, no information has been formally shared with Aurovilians about the purpose of the tree cutting and land clearing.

The legality of the AVFO's actions are still in question. While the 'stay' in principle allows the AVFO to cut the trees until a further court judgement, the law – and Auroville's Master Plan – requires environmental clearance for such actions.

Devastation in Darkali Park

Large sections of the environmentally-sensitive Darkali area have been devastated in the AVFO's efforts to pave the Crown road through the 50-acre park.

The extensive earth works and soil piling has not only destroyed rare, regenerating TDEF trees and formed a physical barrier for fauna and water, it has also destroyed the park's sophisticated rain water conservation system. With water from more than 60% of the area inside Auroville's 'Crown' draining through Darkali during the monsoons, the park's water system would typically harvest an estimated four million litres of water per year. This is a vital contribution to aquifer recharge and the future ecological sustainability of Auroville and its neighbouring villages.



Massive tree cutting in Auroville, April 2024



Auroville barren area due to tree cutting, May 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*



Ongoing works on the Crown road in the Darkali area, May 2024

However, in recent months, some of Darkali's most important water harvesting structures have been partially filled with earth, and the topography of the Crown has been dramatically altered for roads and the lake. The negative impact on aquifer recharge will no doubt be felt soon.

Other dams and water harvesting ponds in Auroville will most likely be destroyed in the AVFO's indiscriminate actions to build the Crown Road, Radials and Outer Ring Road. The negligent filling in and paving over of vital water ways does not take into account Auroville's topographical particularities, nor the water drainage system across the Auroville plateau, nor the need to fortify the region's water security for the future.

Road developments

The AVFO continues to invite many tenders for various works within Auroville. Among them are tenders to execute the balance portion of the Crown Road, including LED street lighting, as well as tenders to construct an Outer Ring Road. The latter would be a huge circular road separating Auroville's city centre from its Greenbelt, which may also encourage heavy motorised traffic within Auroville. There are many unanswered questions about the likely impact on mobility and local ecology. Moreover, auctioning off Auroville's infrastructure development to external parties who are merely doing a job for financial benefit and are not aligned with the ideals of the project is not likely to result in the Auroville envisioned by the Mother, or architecturally conceptualised by Chief Architect Roger Anger.



Auroville Crown road in the making, April 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

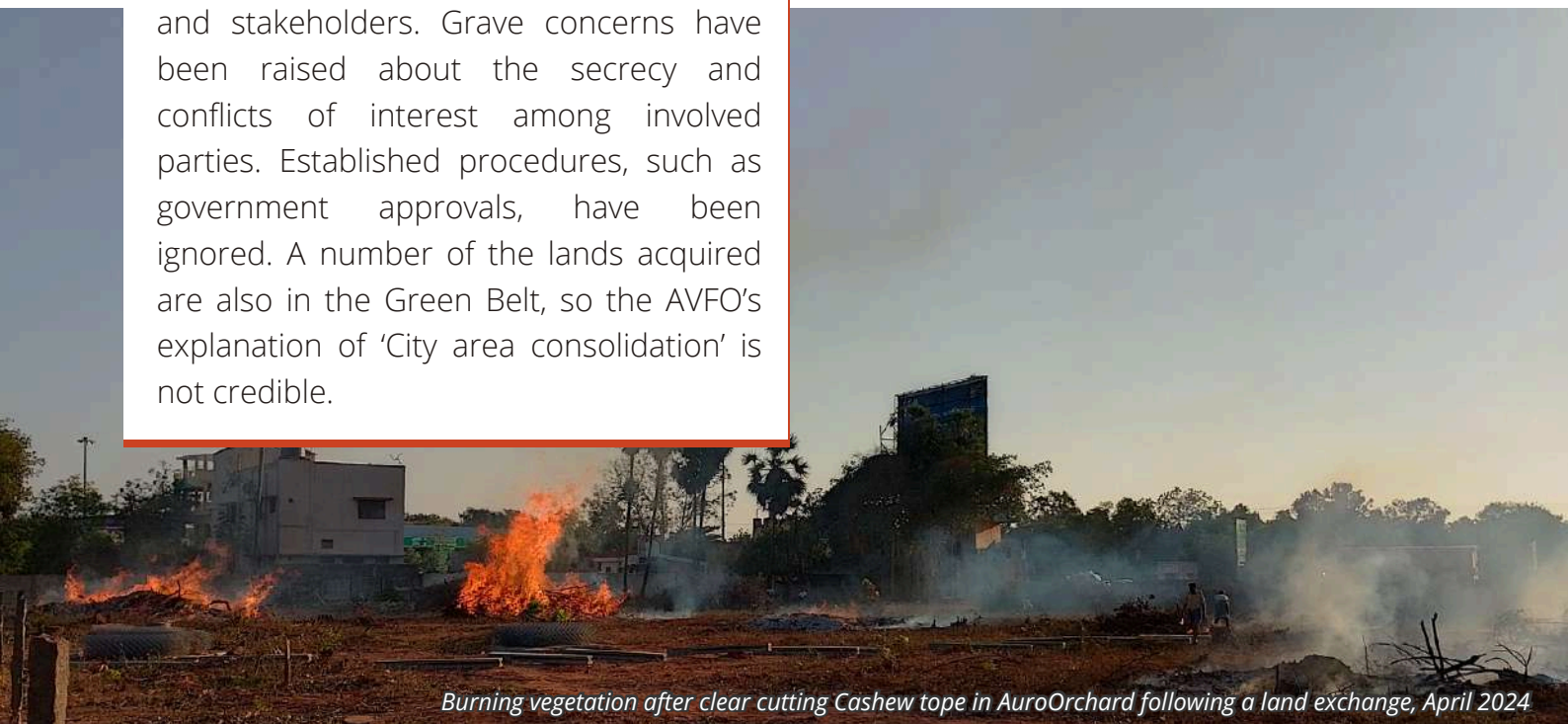
Financial mismanagement continues

Preying on Auroville land

As reported in our last edition [*Voice of Auroville*, Issue 05], the AVFO has been exchanging prime Auroville properties - including highly valuable large plots near the highway - for small parcels of land in Auroville's city centre under the guise of 'consolidation' for development. The unequal exchanges are destroying Auroville's essential land base, and the reported undervaluation of Auroville lands has resulted in significant financial losses (more than ₹150 Crores or US \$18 million). It is reported that more such land exchanges are in the pipeline.

These exchanges have taken place in an opaque manner and without the required consultation with key Auroville committees and stakeholders. Grave concerns have been raised about the secrecy and conflicts of interest among involved parties. Established procedures, such as government approvals, have been ignored. A number of the lands acquired are also in the Green Belt, so the AVFO's explanation of 'City area consolidation' is not credible.

The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly has repeatedly requested government intervention to freeze ongoing land exchange deals and to conduct independent investigations. It has sent legal notices to authorities regarding violations of finance rules and lack of consultation. An Auroville resident filed a petition in the Madras High Court on 28th March requesting the Auroville Foundation to refrain from land exchanges and to cancel registrations of land exchanges that have taken place since 2021. Also, on 28th March, four of the five International Advisory Council (IAC) members circulated a letter to Auroville Residents that expressed their alarm at reports of land exchanges. The letter outlined their concern regarding "the unequal value of land being exchanged by the Auroville Foundation" and the losses that have been incurred.



Burning vegetation after clear cutting Cashew tope in AuroOrchard following a land exchange, April 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

They said that they had sent a “strongly worded statement” to the Governing Board to express their concerns and to request that exchanges be paused “until the community is reassured that effective steps to ensure transparency and fairness to all stakeholders have been taken.” No response has been forthcoming.

All Auroville lands have been bought with funds donated in good faith by Aurovilians and well-wishers around the world. These indiscriminate exchanges betray the trust of these donors as well as the local former landowners who were willing to part with their land for the benefit of the Auroville project. The situation calls for immediate intervention to halt all land exchanges and address malpractices in order to ensure transparency and adherence to proper processes and Auroville's principles.



Farms once again under attack

In March, the AVFO tendered and auctioned the harvest of the fruit trees on Auroville farms without any consultation. This means that Auroville farms lose yet another source of income, in addition to recent maintenance cuts and loss of productive farmland due to land exchanges. The Auroville Farm Group publicly decried the actions as “yet another blow to farming in Auroville”. It seems perverse that the AVFO is actively making Auroville farms untenable when the Governing Board itself had previously emphasised the need for Auroville to sustainably produce its own food. It is possible that such transactions concerning the lease of Auroville's fruit trees by the AVFO might be subject to future legal challenges.

Community funds continue to vanish

An additional number of Aurovilians were notified by the AVFO's appointees in February that their monthly stipend would be cut, starting 1st March. This followed earlier emails to some residents that their work would be “realigned”. Over the last two years, 160 residents have had their stipends cancelled, leaving a number of these individuals with no alternative viable



New fence through vegetable cultivation in AuroOrchard, May 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*



livelihood. Further cuts are expected and will deeply affect Aurovilians who depend on the modest sum to cover basic living expenses - including their monthly community contribution - for themselves and their families. At the same time, a number of residents who had been granted a waiver on contributions due to their limited resources have been ordered to start paying contributions, including 'arrears' on supposed amounts due, going back up to three years. This is financially impossible for many. Moreover, it is highly questionable to change an existing policy and practice, and then demand that residents pay 'back dues' calculated according to these changes while ignoring the fact that they were complying with the policy at the time.

Meanwhile, on 9th April, the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly sent an email to AVFO appointees demanding that they restore access to the accounts and funds of the various groups selected by the Residents' Assembly, which were cut two years ago, along with the individual stipends of group members. These funds were allocated from community-generated funds, which make up over 90% of Auroville's total annual income.

Cuts to cultural centres

Two of Auroville's largest cultural and performing arts centres were informed by AVFO appointees that their funding would be reduced to partial or zero support from April 2024. Auroville's CRIPA (Centre for Research in Performing Arts) and Pitanga Cultural Centre were directed to become self-sufficient in less than two months and may be forced to begin charging for access. Auroville has been a strong example of free and accessible community arts and cultural spaces, but this is now progressively being curtailed.



AVFO defunds and blocks essential online services

Ever since the AVFO's forceful takeover of the community's auroville.org.in domain in 2022, it has appeared that @auroville.org.in email addresses were no longer secure. This, together with a systematic use of censorship to shut down dissenting voices, has greatly affected the community's use of certain online services such as the AuroNet - an online forum for the residents of Auroville. However, other online services were still functional and in use - until recently.

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Talam, the Auroville unit that had developed and managed key software support for many of Auroville's online services, announced that it would have to cease support for 22 software services from April 2024. Talam had already been explicitly instructed by the AVFO in July 2023 to hand over its work to AVFO appointees, yet these appointees never stepped forward to take on the required work. Affected services include the Auroville Directory, the Guest Registration Service and the Matrimandir booking portal. In May 2024, as an emergency response, the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly took the initiative to release a new beta software that ensures access for all to the Auroville Directory

A number of Auroville services and units have been affected by similar AVFO directives over the last two years. In each case, the AVFO has summarily withdrawn funding and replaced an existing service provider with their own appointees who are often unable to do the work. It would appear the AVFO is more concerned with community control, and appearance of power, rather than effective community support systems.

Perseverance and resilience amidst crisis

New representatives for the Residents' Assembly

The Selection Process to appoint new representatives of the Residents' Assembly took place on 27th-28th April 2024. The Working Committee invited residents to take part in the selection process despite the ongoing crisis, emphasising that "The Residents' Assembly is alive and continues to function... Building a strong, united and dedicated community, and manifesting the 'City the Earth Needs' is the call of the hour. This is not only our collective responsibility but also our aim for being here, our promise to ourselves and to the ... true spirit of Auroville."

The response to this call was heartening and, as a result of this Selection Process, new representatives were selected for three of the Residents' Assembly's working groups, including two new members for the seven-member Working Committee.



Representatives of the Residents' Assembly addressing Auroville residents at a General Meeting, 30th April 2024

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Local Aurovilians gather to denounce the takeover

A community meeting took place on 16th March to update participants in Tamil and English about various aspects of Auroville's takeover. The actions of the AVFO were criticised by Tamil community members, who emphasised Auroville's responsibility to care for the welfare of the neighbouring villages. The speakers stated they had approached local authorities for support. The meeting was followed up one week later with a related meditation event called 'Dream about the Future'.

Auroville farmers strive to survive

AuroOrchard, one of Auroville's oldest and most productive organic farms, has been the target of several highly questionable land exchanges by the AVFO [See Voice of Auroville, Issue 05]. Over 16 acres of its farmland have been handed to speculators involved in real-estate development, with devastating impact on farm production. Despite the losses, AuroOrchard team members communicated on 26th May that they are reorganising themselves to advance their vision of growing food for Auroville. Thanks to national and international support, they have been able to start cultivating new crops in non-exchanged land plots.

“

“Aquifers and watersheds don't understand administrative boundaries. These are common resources for the people. All along, Auroville has planned for the entire Kaluveli watershed.

Do we want to live on an island which excludes the local people? Or do we want to live in a demonstrative manner in the highest ideals of Sri Aurobindo and tenets of human unity and inclusion that we inspire people to live in those ways?”

Major Arun Ambathy, Newcomer, in a speech given at the meeting organised by local Aurovilians against the takeover, here denouncing AVFO water mismanagement.



Major Arun Ambathy speaking to fellow residents, 16th March 2024



— *Summary – February to May 2024*

Council Room still held in 24/7 vigil

Auroville Council members received a letter in March 2024 from AVFO appointees which stated that the “unauthorised users” of the Council meeting room located in the Town Hall must vacate by 15th March and that strict action would be taken against those that violated this order. The room is currently used by essential groups of the Residents’ Assembly, such as the Entry Board and the Council, and has been ‘held’ by residents for more than 20 months in a continuous 24-hour a day vigil. The Working Committee of the Residents’ Assembly described the notice as an overreach of power and an intimidation tactic that disregards once more the essential role of the Residents’ Assembly and its duly selected working groups in the day-to-day management of Auroville. Despite the notice, the vigil still continues thanks to courageous residents.

Award recognises Bernard Declercq’s ecological work

In April 2024, on the occasion of the birth anniversary of the late agricultural scientist and ecological farming expert Dr. G. Nammalvar, Aurovilian Bernard Declercq was presented with the Vanagam Award For Lifetime Achievement in honour of his consistent efforts, along with those of his wife Deepika, to reforest the barren land of Auroville’s Pebble Garden.



The Nammalvar Ecological Foundation for Global Food Security and Farm Research created this special award to acknowledge and recognise Bernard's quiet and decades-long contribution towards re-greening the planet. Ironically, the current Auroville administration does not seem to value this work at all, as can be seen in its intentions to give away important sections of Pebble Garden as part of a land exchange deal.

[See *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 05]

Statement on Auroville’s current situation

Two members of Auroville’s International Advisory Council (IAC) published a strong statement on misgovernance under Auroville’s current administration. They called upon the Governing Board and Secretary to “change course, reverse recent decisions, engage in genuine consultations with the Residents’ Assembly, and make a sincere attempt to understand Auroville (...) to boost the successes further and work out solutions to resolve the failures or limitations in a collaborative atmosphere.” Their letter decried: the breakdown in the spirit of

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

mutuality and “strong arm tactics” to “coerce residents into obedience”; the AVFO’s lack of a detailed plan or an environmental audit and its ongoing destruction and degradation of the environment; the Governing Board’s failure to rein in the administration and its Secretary; and a misreading of the Auroville Charter and the Auroville Foundation Act.

This letter was further endorsed by eight eminent international personalities, including five former IAC members. Extracts from this statement are reproduced on page 30 of this issue.

Creation of an Auroville Global Fellowship

On 28th February 2024, Auroville’s birthday, the Auroville Global Fellowship was launched by a group of residents. It is an email forum on which national and international Auroville supporters who have significantly contributed to the world in fields related to the evolutionary ideals of Auroville can be informed about and discuss current developments in Auroville, and can serve as a valuable sounding board. This email forum is taking shape, and will hopefully become an enduring resource to support Auroville in this moment of crisis and beyond.

More or less at the same time, the AVFO created its own Fellowship program, with a different purpose: recruiting new interns, who would work and receive stipends and

housing to support their activities in Auroville. These initiatives, despite their similar names, should not be confused.

State politicians express concern

In a speech given while visiting Puducherry, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Mr. M. K. Stalin suggested that Auroville is currently under the wrongful influence of an external interest group and pledged his support to an implementation of Auroville that would be “according to the dream of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother”.

Meanwhile, Shri M. Chakrapani, a Member of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly for a nearby constituency, handed over a letter to the AVFO Secretary in April 2024 alleging Auroville mismanagement over the last two years; this letter has been widely circulated. He stated that Auroville’s continued development and sustainability is a matter of great pride for the 100 villages he represents. He criticised Auroville’s current governance, in particular the replacement of local Tamil Aurovilians in working groups with other Tamil appointees as “a tokenistic” move, and expressed his disapproval at the dismissal of local Tamil workers without sufficient compensation. He objected to the harassment of Aurovilian Tamils who have taken issue with recent decisions, and expressed concern about delayed visa renewal of foreigners who are dedicated to Auroville and have exposed “corruption

— *Summary – February to May 2024*

and illegal activities". Mr. Chakrapani raised the issue of bribes and corruption in cases involving land purchases, and questioned the Secretary about measures to ensure transparency and financial probity. Mr. Chakrapani concluded his letter stating that if the current malpractices, such as the abuse of power, corruption, and harassment of Tamil Auroville residents and foreigners, are not remedied soon, the Secretary may lose the goodwill and support of the neighbouring villages and the population of Auroville, resulting in increased public protest against the current administration.

Hope remains

Despite the deplorable state in which Auroville finds itself, shaken to the core by the steady stream of violations, hope remains. The recent Madras High Court judgements uphold the residents' rights to participate in the co-creation of their environment. This, and the show of support from within India and around the world, gives residents some hope. You, as a reader of this issue, can also play a crucial role in bolstering Auroville and its residents through the crisis: your presence and active support make a difference. To learn more about **how to help**, please refer to the last page of this issue.

***Voice of Auroville editors,
June 2024***



"It is unbelievable that within a short span, a comparatively short span of 12-14 years, all this has been created by the inhabitants of Auroville. I have nothing but admiration."

Shri P. V. Narasimha Rao,
late Prime Minister of India, and at the
time Minister of External Affairs, 1986



Budding tree at the Town Hall - Matrimandir crossing, April 2023

— *Development or Destruction?*



Excavations for the Matrimandir lake continue despite residents' objections, March - June 2024

— Statement

on Auroville's current situation by two IAC members

At the end of January 2024, two current members of Auroville's International Advisory Council (IAC) expressed their deep concern about misgovernance by the current administration of the Auroville Foundation in a public statement supported by an additional eight eminent international personalities (including five former IAC members). What follows is an abridged version of that statement:

Almost sixty years ago, a handful of people from distant parts of the world and, later, India heard the Mother's silent call and started trickling into the area now known as Auroville, then a nearly bare expanse of red soil. Through the hard work and dedication of what grew to be hundreds, this place and community, with all its limitations and imperfections, became an inspiration to all those aspiring for alternatives to the world's current self destructive direction. Apart from visible manifestations — a regenerated land and water table, productive farms, the Matrimandir, handicraft units, pioneering research and techniques of all kinds — countless visitors to Auroville, trainees, volunteers, students, have testified to a life-changing experience. And Auroville's large pool of experts in every conceivable field has provided skills and know-how not only to the bioregion, but also to governments and private institutions in India and abroad. ...



Flower ritual for brutally destroyed trees, January 2024

Since July 2021, the current administration of the Auroville Foundation has declared that all of the above amounts to very little, apparently taking the view that a "city" of concrete roads and buildings was the only way forward. Incomprehensibly, it has repeatedly shown deep contempt for Auroville's afforestation, water management and rural development programmes, among other sterling accomplishments. Falsely claiming to follow the Master Plan 2001 (which is only a broad framework), operating without a detailed plan or an environmental audit, it has irrationally insisted on perfect circles for Auroville's internal roads, and on 12 radial roads, all of which are now destroying thousands of precious trees and degrading the very environment that the Master Plan wisely put at the centre of Auroville's development. ...

— Statement

on Auroville's current situation (continued)

As Mother wrote in a 1971 message: *"Auroville should not fall back into old errors which belong to a past that is trying to revive."* Yet that is precisely what we are now witnessing.

This is even more visible in the strong-arm tactics the Community has endured for over two years now. We will not detail here the unjustifiable methods deployed to coerce Residents into obedience — including denial of visas or monthly maintenances, opaque and objectionable land exchanges, unilateral takeover of internal working groups, exclusion of Auroville's world-class experts in all fields, side-lining of the Residents' Assembly, and the shameful demonization of those who have questioned these methods. In several letters and statements addressed to the Governing Board's Chairperson, we have objected to all of the above, and offered constructive suggestions as well as our cooperation to work out collaborative solutions, without our advice being heard or our offer made use of. ...

Instead, we wish to highlight what, in our careful estimate, lies at the heart of the current phase of misgovernance:

1. **The complete breakdown of the spirit of mutuality**, with both the Governing Board and the Auroville Foundation's Secretary rejecting due processes of consultation, which are the established norm in any democratic society, and should be much more so in an experiment for creating a new type of society.

2. **The Governing Board's failure to rein in the administration and its Secretary**. Unfortunately, none of the Governing Board members fulfils the conditions laid down in the Auroville Foundation Act. ... The Governing Board members could have remedied their shortcomings through multiple exchanges and consultations with Residents, experts, units, working groups, and by conducting open houses and other meetings, but chose instead to cut themselves off from the Community and ignore the existence of the Residents' Assembly, one of the Foundation's three bodies, which they are mandated to work in consultation with.

3. **A misreading of the Auroville Charter and the Auroville Foundation Act**. Since "Auroville belongs to nobody in particular", it cannot belong to the Auroville Foundation. ... The Auroville Foundation is morally a **custodian and trustee** of Auroville's assets, not an owner in the ordinary sense of the term.



— Statement

on Auroville's current situation (continued)

It is also crucial to note that apart from a few buildings for educational and allied purposes, the Foundation has not created these assets; **all lands and most buildings of Auroville have been created out of private funds and donations**, from within Auroville's own resources or from donors in India and abroad. And they have been developed through the hard labour of generations of Residents. To dispose of those assets without any consultation is unacceptable and disregards Auroville's foundational principles. ...

Abandoning the Charter, issuing unilateral and arbitrary diktats, brushing aside all advice received, indulging in opaque and unethical practices, will certainly not create the Auroville of Mother's dreams. Auroville was not intended to become a real estate project with the appearance of a regimented "spiritual" community. ...

Let us recall the core of Auroville's adventure: not for a set of roads and buildings, which could be done anywhere else in the world, but to create a new society of human beings endowed with a consciousness higher than the old mental ego now triumphing everywhere. ...

Let us also recall how the Auroville Foundation Act wisely asks the International Advisory Council, in "tendering any advice to the Governing Board" to "endeavour to secure that (a) the

ideals for which Auroville has been established are encouraged, and (b) the residents of Auroville are allowed freedom to grow and develop activities and institutions for the fulfilment of the aspirations and programmes envisaged in the said Charter of Auroville." This freedom is what has been denied in recent times, and what must be restored. It is central to Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and vision of a future humanity, as he said in 1926:

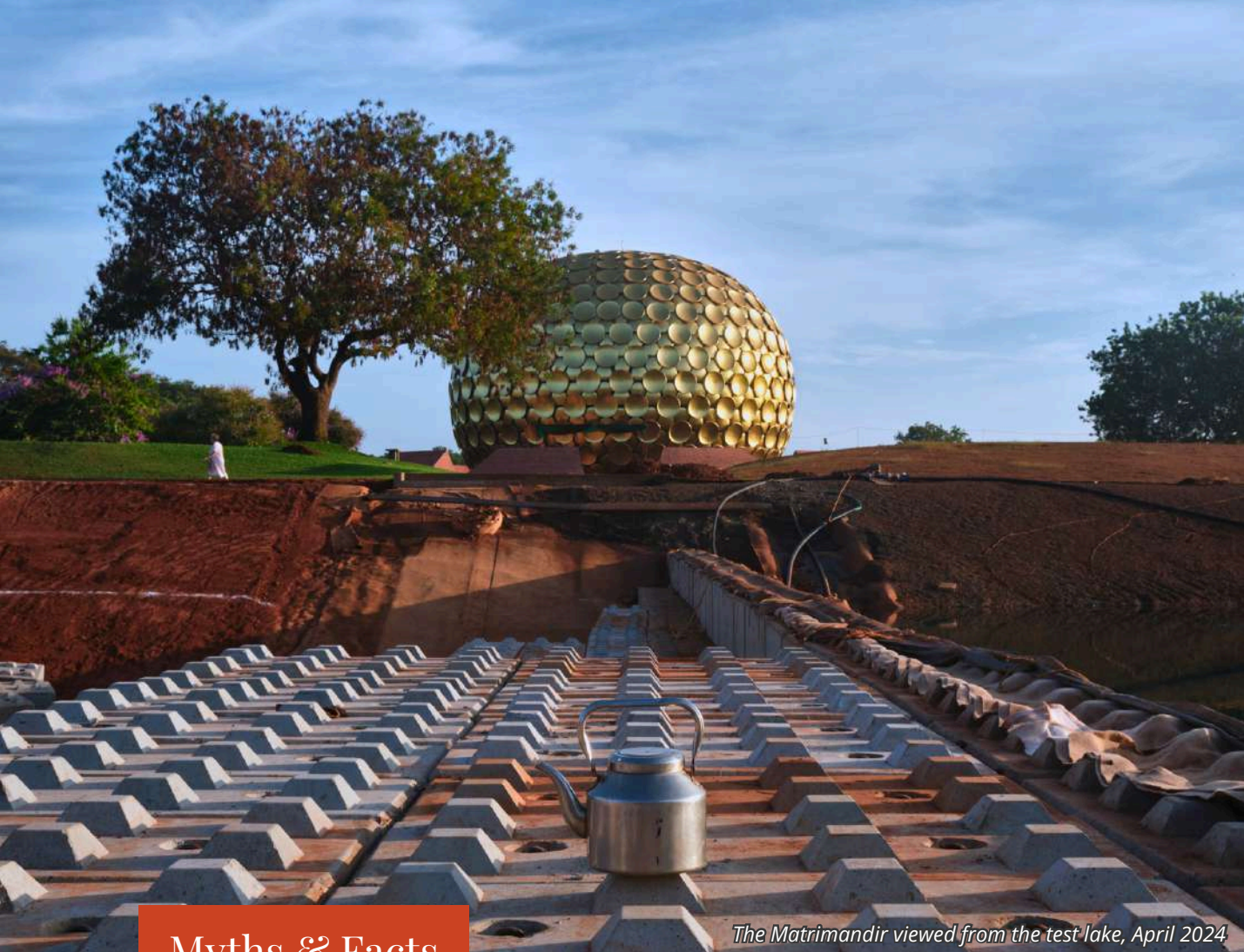
"I have no faith in government controls because I believe in a certain amount of freedom — freedom to find out things for oneself in one's own way, even freedom to commit blunders. Nature leads us through various errors and mistakes. When Nature created the human being with all his possibilities of errors and mistakes she knew very well what she was about. Freedom for experiment in human life is a great thing. Without the freedom to take risk and commit mistakes there can be no progress. ... Growth of consciousness cannot come without freedom."

This, too, is Auroville's core and roadmap.

With hope and prayers,
Gabi Gillesen and Michel Danino,
members, Auroville Foundation's
International Advisory Council

This public statement and additional statements, along with the bios of the authors, are available in full by [clicking here](#) or scanning the QR code.





Myths & Facts

The Matrimandir viewed from the test lake, April 2024

Countering misleading narratives

4

Over the last two years, an increasing number of misleading narratives have been spread within Auroville and in the media, with the purpose of creating confusion. This section aims to clarify and debunk one of these narratives with facts.

- **Myth: The conflict in Auroville has escalated because residents initiated court cases that challenge AVFO actions.**

— *Countering misleading narratives*

Myth: The conflict in Auroville has escalated because residents initiated court cases that challenge AVFO actions.

A narrative that has been repeated by AVFO supporters in recent times suggests that ‘all would be well’ if only Aurovilians and their representatives would passively stand by and allow the AVFO to impose its own wishes upon Auroville. According to this claim, tensions escalated only because of residents’ responses to the AVFO’s actions. This fails to acknowledge the many efforts at dialogue that were initiated by residents which were dismissed by the AVFO, including processes led by professional experts such as the Dreamweaving initiative [see *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 01]. Legal proceedings against the AVFO were begun only as a last resort when it became clear that the AVFO was acting without regard for the law or for the spirit of Auroville itself, and only after there had been direct attacks on residents in the form of police complaints with false charges, external enforcers being called to physically threaten and intimidate residents, visa recommendations being withheld and much more.

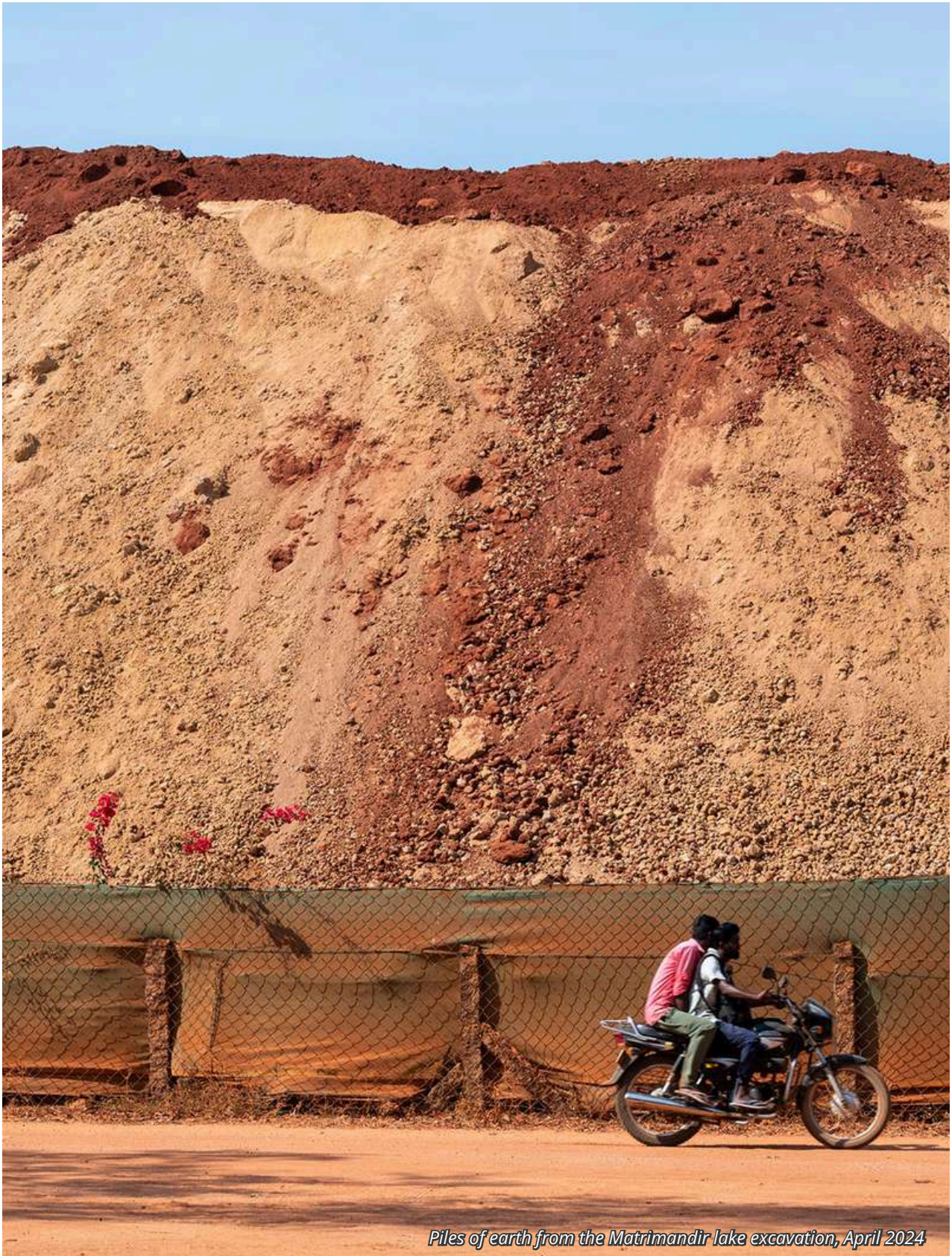
Court cases challenging AVFO actions have been initiated by residents to ensure that the structure and spirit of Auroville’s governance is upheld as outlined in the Auroville Foundation Act of 1988. For

example: to protect the Residents’ Assembly’s right to appoint its own representative committees and to determine who lives in Auroville; to halt unwarranted tree destruction until adequate environmental clearances and development plans are in place; to uphold residents’ rights to manage the funds and assets that they have themselves generated, created and built.

Given the AVFO’s ongoing and well-documented overreaches of power, this claim appears to be an attempt to minimise AVFO legal transgressions while simultaneously shifting blame onto legally-elected representatives of Auroville’s residents. The claim conveniently disregards the ill will the AVFO has generated every time it has bypassed Residents’ Assembly processes, and the continual retaliation against residents who have raised valid concerns. Residents have suffered punishments including visa suspensions, fabricated criminal complaints, loss of monthly stipends, and expulsion from their homes.

In short, this myth appears to be yet another unsubstantiated gaslighting narrative that attempts to displace responsibility for ongoing tensions onto the Residents’ Assembly. All of the groups and committees appointed by the Residents’ Assembly have repeatedly offered to collaborate on equal ground with the AVFO, but have only been ignored and sidelined.

— *Back to barren red hills?*



Piles of earth from the Matrimandir lake excavation, April 2024

— *How to help?*

Thank you for reading our sixth issue of *Voice of Auroville*. We hope that you found it an informative read, despite the alarming news it covers.

The aim of our journal is to give voice to the Residents' Assembly of Auroville and uphold its decades of work to realise '*the City the Earth Needs*' for the common good.

Wondering what you can do to help the Auroville community? Here are a few immediate suggestions:



1 Stay updated and well informed

The new administrative regime has invested much of its efforts in **controlling the narrative** by censoring information, publishing oversimplified propaganda through diverse channels and punishing dissenting views. Today more than ever, we are all invited to be discerning and check the credibility of the information we hear and read.

Some reliable and fact-based news sources, other than this journal, include the www.auroville.media website, and a community-led newsletter called "Evolving Galaxy". For more information, contact evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com. To subscribe to *Voice of Auroville*, contact voiceofauroville@auroville.services

2 Spread the word, raise awareness

Share this journal - and other testimonies - with your contacts and friends to make sure the voice of the Aurovilians is not silenced. Everyone should know that Auroville needs help. If you can, reach out to potential change-makers: people with a wide network, journalists, diplomats, artists...

3 Offer your service or financial support

The current struggle for Auroville's survival requires everyone's help and participation. If you are able to offer some of your time and energy, please get in touch with workingcom@auroville.services. If you can offer some financial support to help those whose livelihoods have been impacted by the current crisis, reach out to bcc@auroville.services. Thank you - together we are stronger.



*"Auroville is an attempt towards world
peace, friendship, fraternity, unity."*

– The Mother, 20th September 1966



Auroville's 50th anniversary, 28th February 2018



WORKING COMMITTEE
of the Residents' Assembly
AUROVILLE FOUNDATION

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