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VOICE OF AUROVILLE

News & Highlights from the Auroville Community



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AUROVILLE
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Cover image: Community gathering to oppose recent land exchanges, July 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.



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“Peace through human unity:

Unity through uniformity is an absurdity.

Unity must be realised through the union of the many.

Each one is part of the unity; each one is indispensable to the whole.”

The Mother,
October 1969



— *Introduction*

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In this seventh issue, we focus mainly on a summary of **recent events**, along with articles that reflect Auroville's **achievements** and **ongoing challenges**.

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Bonfire for Sri Aurobindo's birthday, 15th August 2024



Art installation in an Auroville forest, June 2024



Ongoing destruction in Darkali Forest, August 2024

Editorial Note

Redefining the lines

Auroville, the international township dedicated to human unity in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, continues to face unprecedented challenges to its autonomy and founding principles. Well into its 57th year of existence, Auroville finds itself at a critical juncture, poised on the edge of uncertainty. The end of Dr Jayanti Ravi's term as Secretary of the Auroville Foundation in July 2024 and her subsequent transfer back to Gujarat, may bring significant shifts in Auroville's governance landscape. As of October, however, no new Secretary or Acting Secretary has been appointed, leaving the community in a state of uncertainty about whether the destructive policies of the past three years will continue, or if a change in leadership will translate into better realignment with Auroville's founding principles.

This period of transition, however, has not halted the ongoing challenges faced by Auroville. Even in the absence of a Secretary, the takeover and mismanagement of Auroville's assets by the former Secretary's appointees continue unabated. The chokehold on the community's finances has intensified, with budget cuts affecting vital sectors such as education and culture.



*"Peace Warriors 2024"
Art installation in an Auroville forest, June 2024*

Ecologically, the community continues to witness ongoing environmental destruction, with large-scale tree cutting and land clearing occurring without proper approvals, planning or community consultation. [For details on recent land exchanges and environmental concerns, see 'Summary of events' on page 9.]

Editorial Note (continued)

Despite these ongoing challenges, there is cautious optimism within the Auroville community that administrative change may be an opportunity for reset and renewal. Residents remain ready and willing to engage constructively with any new administration that respects Auroville's founding principles, its practice of participatory governance, and its commitment to conscious urban development. The community continues to demonstrate its resilience and dedication to Auroville's vision through various initiatives, including community gatherings, new decision-making platforms, and maintaining open communication channels. These efforts underscore the residents' readiness to build bridges and work cooperatively towards Auroville's development, should a more collaborative administration be appointed.



Art installation in an Auroville forest, June 2024

As Auroville grapples with redefining its boundaries - both literal and figurative - the need for awareness and support from the global community has never been greater. This issue of Voice of Auroville aims to shed light on recent developments and the community's ongoing efforts to preserve the spirit of Auroville.

We invite you, our readers, to engage with the content of this issue and consider how you can contribute to safeguarding this unique experiment in human unity. Your support and involvement are invaluable as Auroville strives to navigate these challenges and emerge stronger, continuing on its mission to becoming 'the City the Earth Needs'.

***Voice of Auroville editors,
November 2024***



Art installation in an Auroville forest, June 2024

Letter

by the Auroville International Board to UNESCO

Disturbing developments in the international city of Auroville

The following letter, signed by the Auroville International Board Chairman and Secretary, was sent to the Director General of UNESCO, Madame Azoulay, in September 2024. Auroville International (AVI) is a global network aimed at supporting all aspects of Auroville's development. Founded in 1983, it is legally registered in the Netherlands, with representation in 34 countries around the world. Nine of these are national centres, which are registered associations in their respective countries, and the other 25 are liaisons, which are smaller groups or single individuals.

Your Excellency Madame Azoulay,

Greetings from Auroville International (AVI), the worldwide community related to Auroville, the international city in the making in South India, founded in 1968. UNESCO has supported Auroville since its inception by five resolutions of the General Assembly, inviting the nations of the world to take part in this unique experiment of a city dedicated to Human Unity.

We are writing to you today to inform you about developments over the last three years that have shaken the very basics and



Flower offering for brutally destroyed trees, January 2024

fabric of Auroville, running counter to the noble aims of its founding idea as laid down in the Charter.

In its 56 years of existence Auroville has proven worthy of the trust expressed by the UNESCO resolutions, statements and direct support. It has attracted people from currently 61 nations to live together peacefully and work collectively to build the city on an erstwhile barren land which they have changed into a lush green environment by planting millions of trees, developing adapted water management systems and other sustainable measures.

— *Letter to UNESCO (continued)*

Aurovilians are dedicated to fulfilling the high goal set by the founder, Mira Alfassa, called The Mother, of becoming a living laboratory for the realization of all discoveries from without and within. It is their aim to create a replicable model of sustainable living in harmony with nature and to become “a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity”, as its Charter states.

Visitors and volunteers from all corners of the world have found inspiration, practical guidance and training in Auroville. Over the years, its role model function has also radiated to the surrounding bioregion, which has benefited in many ways from the active support offered by the Aurovilians, since it is looked upon as part and parcel of the experiment.



India, the host country of Auroville, has extended her generous support and protection over more than half a century. Countless Indian dignitaries, high officials and eminent businessmen have

expressed their appreciation and given their blessings. By an Act of the Indian Parliament the “Auroville Foundation” has been created in 1988 to “further development of Auroville in accordance with its original charter”.

For the last three years, however, Auroville’s development has been pushed in a different direction when a new Secretary to the Auroville Foundation took office, appointed by the Central Government. Together with a likewise newly appointed Governing Board, one of the three authorities of the Foundation, they started to dominate and sideline the other two authorities namely the Residents’ Assembly and the International Advisory Council – thus disturbing the well established balance between the three bodies as enshrined in the Auroville Foundation Act.

As a result the residents of Auroville are being subjected to severe repressive measures and adverse developments for the community, for example:

- Non-recognition of existing administrative and working groups, legitimately elected by the Residents’ Assembly. Establishment of groups with the same name, empowered by the Secretary and Governing Board, increasingly composed with Indian officials who have no connection to Auroville’s ideals and ethics and only report back to the Secretary.

— *Letter to UNESCO (continued)*

- Land deals that have raised concerns and have led to investigations initiated by Central Government agencies.
- Infrastructure measures, including the unnecessary destruction of thousands of trees, that take no account of ecological concerns and previous successes in environmental and climate protection and have a negative impact on the entire bioregion.
- Refusal to sign recommendation letters for visas needed by non-Indian residents, which increasingly jeopardizes Auroville's international character and undermines its founding idea. These measures also affect members of the community who have lived in Auroville from the early beginnings, have dedicated their lives, energies and considerable funds to Auroville and have meanwhile reached a senior age with often no other place to go. At the same time support and benefits for senior Aurovilians in general are being cut back.
- Unfavorable measures that particularly affect Tamil Aurovilians and workforce from the surrounding villages.
- Cutting of maintenances (stipends) for Aurovilians working in Services, such as on farms, in forests, in health services, in educational institutions etc.

- Blocking and taking over of community media, such as the email server, local newspapers, community forums and outreach media.

Many of the distressed Aurovilians are now turning to us, asking for help, which we try to extend in every possible way. It is our wish to make their voice heard and nourish their hope for the restoration of the previously well-balanced governance structure, as prescribed in the Auroville Foundation Act.



We are reaching out to you to keep you informed about these difficult times for Auroville, “la ville de l'Aurore”, in which UNESCO has, like us, invested its high hopes for a brighter future of mankind. We can of course provide you with further information if required.

Please join us in our aspirations for a positive turn of events happening soon.

Yours respectfully,

**John Mulrey, AVI Chairman and
Friederike Muehlhans, AVI Secretary**
24th September 2024



— *Artists in Response*



Art installations in an Auroville forest, June 2024



Current Crisis

Ongoing destruction in Darkali Forest, October 2024

Summary of events – June to October 2024

The aggressive takeover of Auroville - which started 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 May 2024, a summary of which can be found here: www.auroville.media/crisis.

The last months in Auroville have been marked with uncertainty, more takeovers

and misuse of community assets by the Auroville Foundation's Office of the Secretary (**AVFO**) and its appointees, but also with hopeful indicators of resilience.

While the situation is increasingly worrying, residents continue to strive for resolution, and some feel that the tides could soon change. The following pages cover new developments in Auroville between the months of June and October 2024.

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

Power shifts in the AVFO

No more Secretary?

The term of Dr Jayanti Ravi, Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, officially ended at the beginning of July. After weeks of uncertainty regarding the possible extension of her tenure, on 31st July Dr Jayanti Ravi was repatriated to Gujarat where she has been appointed as Additional Chief Secretary (ACS) of the Revenue Department. Months after her departure, however, no new Secretary to the Auroville Foundation has been appointed by the Central Government, and no interim Acting Secretary has been officially appointed either. Since her transfer to Gujarat, it has been reported that Dr Jayanti Ravi has returned to Auroville on multiple occasions, and has held regular online meetings with AVFO staff members and residents illegitimately appointed by her to various positions. All of this creates an unprecedented situation for the Auroville community, as there is uncertainty as to who has the authority to carry out key functions such as visa recommendations.

Changes in the Governing Board

In March 2024, Tamilisai Soundararajan, former Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry and member of the Governing Board, resigned. Six months later, on 30th September, the new Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, Kuniyil Kailashnathan, was apparently appointed as a new member of the Board. The current Governing Board's term is valid until October 2025.

AVFO appointees step down

Over the months of August and September, three officers reportedly stopped working at the AVFO. Smt Vanjulavalli Sridhar, who was an Officer on Special Duty in charge of managing farms and forests, was announced on 28th August as transferring to the Andaman Islands as the Conservator of Forests. A few days later, Dharmesh Chandra Goel, Senior Consultant in matters related to town planning, resigned. In September, the AVFO mentioned via email that Mr Balagandhi, Consultant in Farm Activities, had also stopped working there. There is no news yet whether these three officers will be replaced.



Art installation in an Auroville forest, June 2024

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

Confusions about an AVFO-endorsed group

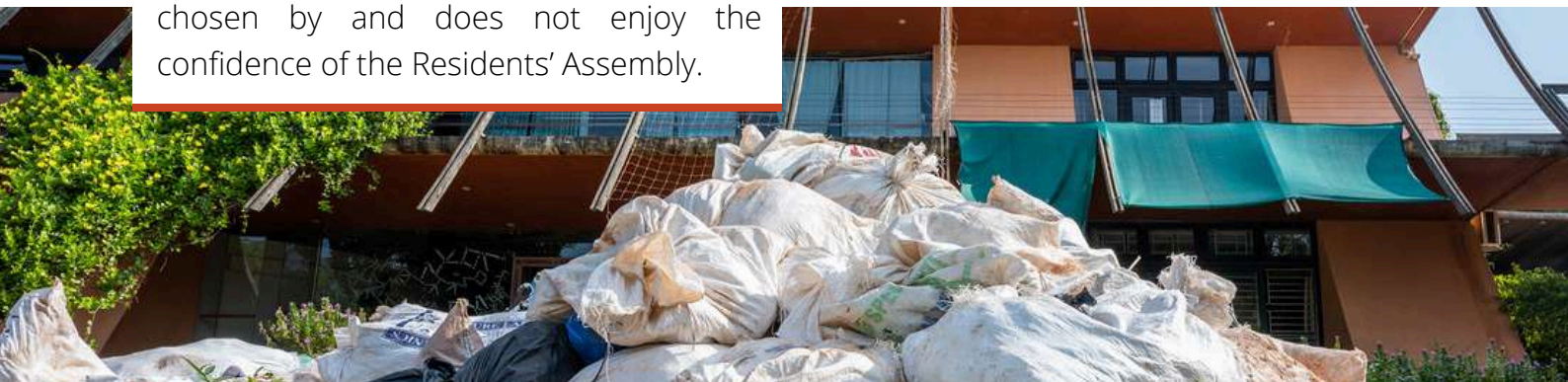
There is still confusion as to who exactly is in the AVFO-endorsed group illegitimately calling itself the 'Working Committee'. A series of communications in September 2024 first omitted all names, then reaffirmed a list of seven names, then again removed some names.

In August 2024, a single-judge bench of the Madras High Court issued a new judgement on the membership of the Working Committee. The court order, published in October, mentions procedural issues with the type of petition filed, leading to dismissal of this petition. Nonetheless, the order reaffirmed that the Madras High Court's judgement of 4th September 2023 "would govern the field qua the management and functioning of Auroville". This earlier order from the Court had reaffirmed the role of the Residents' Assembly in appointing its own representatives, as is required in the Auroville Foundation Act. As such, the AVFO-endorsed 'Working Committee' would not be legitimate, as it has not been chosen by and does not enjoy the confidence of the Residents' Assembly.

Concentration of power

Over the past year, a number of the residents who had actively supported the AVFO have distanced themselves or resigned from their Foundation Office roles. This has resulted in power becoming increasingly concentrated among an even smaller circle of AVFO appointees. In the Land Service, an AVFO-constituted body that is already under scrutiny for questionable deals, two appointees - Meenakshi and Krishnamurthy - have assumed full control. They have installed new locks on the Land Service office, preventing access to other residents and stakeholders, and are managing land exchanges without transparency.

Another notable example is the case of Sindhuja, a resident who has become the AVFO's "Head of Urban Planning", "Media Content Vetter", and "Legal Coordinator". As one of the former Secretary's closest allies, Sindhuja has spearheaded the operations that have systematically destroyed significant portions of Auroville's natural environment and human fabric.



In September 2024, Auroville's Ecoservice (in charge of waste management) dumped piles of trash in front of the Town Hall premises

— Summary – June to October 2024

More recruitments

Amidst the changes and uncertainties, the AVFO continues its recruitment efforts and has even apparently started a project to build additional AVFO staff quarters to house new recruits. Over the last months, several non-Aurovillian employees have been hired by the AVFO for key management functions. In addition, on 5th September, the AVFO published a recruitment notification for four senior posts: one Under Secretary, as well as three Deputy Secretaries in distinct fields: Security; Accounts and Audits; and Administration. This increased recruitment - and the formalisation of these three Deputy Secretary posts as permanent positions without the involvement of the residents or their representatives - raises questions. Does the AVFO now see Auroville as a Government department? What exactly could be the purpose behind creating so many official administrative posts in an experimental township of, at present, 3500 inhabitants?



Tonnes of dirt excavated for Matrimandir lake, September 2024

Land exchanges questioned in the Indian Parliament

At the beginning of August, questions were raised by two Members of Parliament (MP) in each of their respective chambers of Parliament specifically about dubious land exchanges in Auroville. Dr Sukanta Majumdar, Minister of State for Education, responded to these questions, stating that complaints had been received by the Ministry of Education alleging various offences in Auroville, including land encroachment, as well as drug-related issues, and financial irregularities. As for allegations of malpractice in recent land exchanges, Dr Majumdar said they would be investigated by the Governing Board and the AVFO. Several news outlets reported on these statements, with headlines emphasising allegations of illegal activities by residents, rather than focusing on the MPs' original questions about land exchanges.



Art installation in an Auroville forest, June 2024

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

In response, the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly issued a press release expressing deep concern over misleading statements in the media. The Working Committee strongly refuted the allegations, stating they were unsubstantiated and seemed to divert attention from the MPs' questions and the pressing issue of questionable land exchanges conducted by the current Auroville Foundation administration.

The Working Committee also pointed to the fallacy in asking the Governing Board and the AVFO to investigate their own wrongdoings. They called instead for an independent external investigation into recent land exchanges and emphasised the need for transparency and adherence to established processes in future transactions. They also stressed the importance of involving the Residents' Assembly and its committees in these matters.

Land and assets mismanagement

Residents oppose dubious land exchanges

Over the last four months, more questionable land exchanges - conducted by the AVFO and 'authorised' by the Governing Board - have come to light. With the rationale of consolidating land in the city centre, some Auroville land has been given away in exchange at 1% of its market value, resulting in losses of over 240 crore rupees (US\$28 million) to Auroville. In an emergency decision-making process conducted in June, 98% of 945 residents voted to halt, review, and reverse land deals undertaken by the Secretary.



Community gathering to oppose recent land exchanges, July 2024

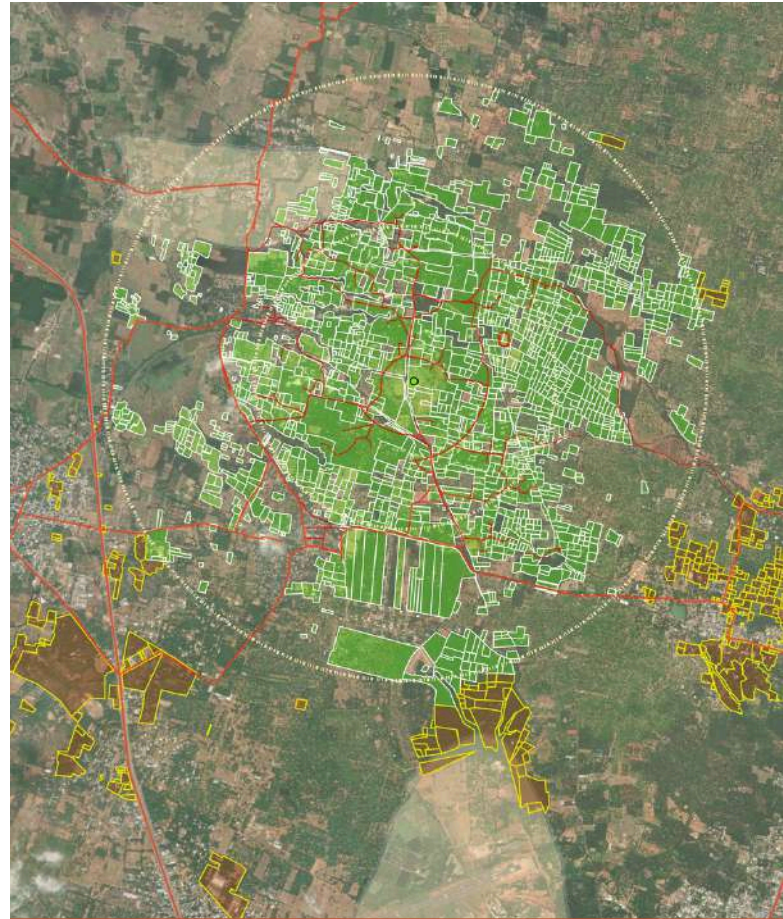
— *Summary – June to October 2024*

The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly has approached the relevant authorities, seeking to review and reverse these land exchanges and ensure that these respect due processes in the future.

Alarm about the opaque land exchanges has also been expressed by three members of Auroville's International Advisory Council (IAC) in a recent letter to the Governing Board. The letter contains detailed data that shows considerable financial loss to Auroville, and asks the Governing Board not to proceed until and unless a transparent and fair process, conducted in consultation with the stakeholders, can be evolved. The IAC members have offered their full collaboration in helping to work out such a process.

Despite these actions and clear calls to halt land exchanges, residents learnt on 25th October that more exchanges have been approved by the Governing Board. A number of residents, including some that were earlier aligned with the AVFO, again expressed their deep concern about opaque land exchanges and have approached relevant authorities.

Recent deals have led to great physical and emotional turmoil for several Auroville communities. In the settlements of Felicity and AuroOrchard, new landowners blocked access to Aurovilians who live on the same (now divided) plot. In the latter community, residents face harassment from the new landowner and



Map showing Auroville's lands within the Master Plan area (in green) and some of its land outside of it (in yellow), 2024

disrupted water supplies. [See article on Auroville land consolidation and its history on page 25 of this issue. See also *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 05 for details on the impact of land exchanges on working farms and residents.]

Housing concerns

Housing issues are of increasing concern. A number of Aurovillian residents have been ordered to vacate their homes, effectively displacing them and disregarding the significant energy and funds they have spent over the years to upgrade and maintain these buildings.

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

Available houses are also being allocated in an arbitrary and opaque manner, and often prioritise AVFO employees over Aurovillian residents.

Meanwhile, the AVFO seems to have greenlighted a project to build three blocks of staff quarters, with the design and construction contracted out to India's Central Public Works Department (CPWD) rather than any of Auroville's in-house award-winning sustainable architecture experts and construction units. No information or plans have been shared with the community, but already land has been cleared in Auroville's residential zone.

Clearing underway for an artificial hill

Over the month of September, large-scale bulldozing took place without any notice or public announcement on the northern side of Auroville's Greenbelt, a circular zone surrounding the city area with farms and forested areas. This followed approval by AVFO appointees of a project to create an artificial hill related to the Matrimandir Lake project in the northern Greenbelt. [See *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 06.] The hill is projected to be 13 acres at its base, 30 metres tall, with a 200 x 400 metre plateau at the top, and would contain 1 million cubic metres of soil. In order to fully develop this hill project, a minimum of 16 acres of land with dense tree cover will likely be bulldozed. Out of these 16 acres, 9 acres have already been cleared. An additional 7 acres will be cleared for the base of the hill as it takes shape.

The project was negotiated in secrecy and raises important concerns. An immediate concern is that construction started at the beginning of the monsoon increases the risk of landslides in the neighbouring areas. A long-term concern is the impact on the watersheds in the bioregion, and yet neighbouring villages have not been consulted at all. Alarming, no ecological plans have been made public, even though this project may strongly impact the immediate environment.



Massive bulldozing and clearing for the hill, October 2024

— *Summary – June to October 2024*



Continued clearing for this planned road will plough through several Auroville forests, including the Revelation Forest Sanctuary, nearby Kottakarai village, as well as existing Auroville homes and buildings.

In October 2024, without prior notification to affected residents, AVFO appointees began dismantling the Vikas Radial, a fully functional road that serves as the sole access point for the second most dense residential area of Auroville, and which is the only route for daily movements of hundreds of residents. It appears that the bulk of construction, planned to last three months, will take place during the monsoon season, and heavy rainfall will make dug-up roads even more dangerous.

Residents' requests to halt the excavation for the Matrimandir Lake and related projects such as this hill have been ignored.

Dismantling of existing infrastructure continues

Following the 2022-2023 destruction of eco-friendly Crown road sections and their replacement with prefabricated concrete slabs, the AVFO has continued its controversial approach to road development. Initial work focused on constructing disconnected Crown road segments on Foundation-owned land parcels, creating a fragmented network of unusable roads. This year, the construction of the 'outer ring road' has resulted in more isolated road segments and more tree clearing.



— *Summary – June to October 2024*

Concerned residents from the affected communities have written to the AVFO's urban planning appointees requesting several reasonable measures: safe access to community entrances during construction; phased removal and replacement of road surfaces to minimise disruption; and most importantly, a meeting with the communities to discuss the plan, timeline, and incorporate resident input before further work proceeds.

Constant environmental destruction

As outlined above, ongoing tree cutting, environmental destruction and chaotic development has continued, with no explanation to the community, no presentation of plans, and a seeming disregard for environmental concerns or regulations. Cycle paths have been destroyed; newly-built roads are of very poor quality and lack shade; and land clearing and poor land management practices are predicted to lead to significant land erosion, with serious consequences for Auroville and its neighbours during monsoon.

In addition to the clearing for roads, housing projects and the hill, large-scale tree cutting has also been carried out to make space for a new landfill for Auroville's non-biodegradable waste. On 19th September, the residents assigned to take care of an Auroville area called Nine Palms discovered that half an acre of land, which originally had a tree cover density of up to 85%, had been cleared for this new landfill zone. This plot is situated directly above a major water catchment area, where the first aquifer lies just 15 metres below the surface, which may lead to water contamination. No studies seem to have been done to determine whether or not this was an appropriate location for a landfill.



Felled trees, June 2024

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

Financial squeeze & takeovers continue

Budget cuts for all education

The new school year started mid-July, just weeks after Auroville schools were informed of considerable cuts in budgets that have not been increased or adjusted for inflation since 2019. Auroville's educational units have always relied on a combination of community-generated funds, grants and direct donations. The onus is now on individual schools to fundraise all shortfall from parents and other donors. At the same time, schools are feeling the strain of ever-increasing administrative reporting requirements, while the availability of candidates qualified and willing to work as educators has all but dried up in the present crisis-ridden climate.

In a city whose aim is to be “the place of an unending education”, the AVFO-appointed committee overseeing finances and assets is prioritising higher “financial efficiency” over quality learning environments inspired by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's philosophy of integral education.

Additionally, a new “Physical Education Board” with no official status and dubious authority replaced a number of the trainers and teachers at Auroville's Dehashakti sports complex. This forceful replacement was done overnight, without following any principle of natural justice, even though some of the dismissed individuals had been working there for over a decade.

Auroville's culture throttled

In mid-October, the AVFO appointees overseeing finances and assets abruptly terminated International Talents, a significant Auroville cultural and artistic unit. International Talents' digital platform connected Auroville artists with global audiences. The closure was suddenly implemented following a complaint made by one resident, an AVFO appointee holding multiple official posts, who was also the main investigator and one of the final decision-making authorities in this affair. This raises serious questions about the motivations and integrity of the process. The decision to close this unit will have a significant negative impact on Auroville's cultural and artistic scene.



Pottery at the Auroville Endangered Crafts Mela, February 2019

— Summary – June to October 2024



Kalaripayattu show by the Auroville Kalarigram team, January 2024

More generally, cuts to stipends and budgets across the whole of Auroville's vibrant cultural network further threaten its long-standing commitment to providing free access to events, classes and spaces. Now, many practitioners will be forced to limit access to those who can pay, and residents may no longer be able to afford it.

Asset and unit takeovers

Additional units and services of Auroville are being forcibly taken over, and more and more residents who have proven themselves to be committed, responsible managers of community assets are being replaced with no valid justification or proper process.

An executive of the long-standing Pour Tous Purchasing Service, one of three community grocery outlets serving Auroville, has been forced out of their role despite bringing much appreciated positive change to the functioning of this service, including the resolution of several management and financial issues inherited from previous managers.

The Afsanah Guest House executive and managers have been terminated in a similar fashion, again despite their measurable and significant success in increasing the unit's turnover and quality of service.

The Learning Community (TLC), an education space experimenting with and exploring the Mother's concept of 'Free Progress' or self-directed learning, was abruptly stripped of its entire budget and forced to vacate its campus over the summer months.

In all of the above examples and many more, the AVFO-appointed 'Funds and Assets Management Committee' continues to ignore established internal processes, and refuses to engage in any meaningful exchanges to clarify these decisions. These cases, in conjunction with others before, spotlight the actions and beliefs of individuals who have been hand-picked by the AVFO and placed in positions of power within the community, yet refuse to hold themselves accountable. They freely mismanage assets and funds which were created by the community for the whole collective, in blatant disregard for long-standing community-approved processes.



Cottage at Afsanah Guest House

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

On 20th September, after all previous attempts at dialogue were ignored, the lawyer for the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly served the "Funds and Assets Management Committee appointed by the Governing Board" with a legal notice requesting them to stop their destructive actions, in the absence of which, legal proceedings may be initiated.

Repurposing and appropriating Auroville

Since the replacement of the Visitors Center executives with AVFO-appointees, significant changes have been made in how Auroville welcomes visitors. The Visitors Center is often a first introduction to those visiting Auroville, a showcase for Auroville's achievements and a place to get more information. Under the AVFO-supported management, commercial attractions have been installed along a new route, with stalls, a caricaturist, and a 'wildlife' gallery featuring cement and resin figures of animals with no connection to Auroville's bioregion. Many of the features along this route require an entrance fee and have little to do with Auroville. This move shifts the intent of the Visitors Center from being the starting point in presenting Auroville's meaning and purpose, to making Auroville a cash-grab tourist attraction.

The AVFO has organised and promoted youth camps and similar events which are a willful distortion of Auroville's aspirations, and a poorly disguised attempt to co-opt Auroville's achievements and reputation for the advancement of goals unrelated to its mission. Most Aurovilians are not informed about these events, nor invited to participate in them. Some of these events feature political personalities and discourses, even though Auroville has always strived to avoid national, political and religious divides.

No transparency

As all of the AVFO's actions outlined in this news summary indicate, it has continued to act with little transparency or accountability. For example, minutes of Governing Board meetings - often shared late or obtained only through Right to Information requests - reveal that all decisions taken over the last three years have not sought community input and have not been communicated to the community or its representatives.



Art installation in Auroville, next to the Youth Center, August 2024

— *Summary – June to October 2024*

These include: critical new regulations relating to residents' status in Auroville (i.e., residence, admission and termination criteria); major land exchanges; appointment processes for various Auroville positions that bypass existing Aurovilian experts; and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) signed with external organisations, for example IIT Madras and the Department of Art and Culture of the Government of Puducherry, for purposes that have neither been disclosed nor discussed with the residents.

What's behind the push for big infrastructure?

Major infrastructure projects continue to be announced without any background information about approval process, funding or tenders. AVFO appointees in charge of funds and assets recently made public a Southern Service Node project. The proposal mentions a parking and transit hub together with boutiques and a food court for day tourists and Auroville residents. Funding has apparently been secured, but no source was mentioned.

Still waiting for visas

Visas are still being withheld for some residents, while other residents who are normally eligible for five-year visas, are only given one-year visas. In another incident, one more long-time Auroville resident received a 'Leave India Notice' from India's Foreigners' Registration Office in July.



— *Summary – June to October 2024*

AVFO appointees then gave directions to remove this person from Auroville's Register of Residents. However, this action appears to be legally invalid: only the Residents' Assembly has the authority to decide if an individual should be removed from the Register according to the Auroville Foundation Act, and the Madras High Court has ordered a halt to any changes in the register pending further orders.

Evasive 'Right to Information' replies

AVFO appointees also failed to respond adequately or within stipulated time frames to a number of Right to Information (RTI) requests, a legal right that allows Indian citizens to request information from public authorities, and which promotes transparency and accountability in government functioning. In several instances over the past few months, India's Central Information Commission (CIC) severely admonished the AVFO and its appointees, and ordered them to "provide proper replies/information". The Information Commissioner stated that the replies given by the AVFO were in all cases "evasive and misleading" and suggested that "the denial of information is with mala fide [bad faith] intent."

The community stands tall

Despite the antagonism from the AVFO and its appointees towards residents, the community continues to stand tall and remains resilient. It has undertaken major decision-making processes and other community initiatives, such as the Residents' Assembly decision-making process concerning land exchanges, and a large community event with over 1000 residents in July to share information about these land exchanges.

Residents organised a petition in September against arbitrary decision-making and actions by AVFO appointees "that do not follow correct processes or principles of natural justice". For example, as recounted above, executives of Afsanah Guest House and Pour Tous Purchasing Service were recently dismissed, even though they had solid track records of competent management and profitability, as well as the trust of the community. Other examples include: extraction of monthly contributions from residents who had previously been given waivers due to their lack of resources; and the refusal of visa recommendation letters for those who cannot pay sums that AVFO-appointees claim are 'back dues'. This is creating hardship and bad will, and is discriminatory.



— *Summary – June to October 2024*

Other long-standing initiatives which illustrate the community's resolve and spirit include: the round-the-clock vigil in the Auroville Council room at the Town Hall since July 2022, which ensures that the only remaining meeting space for Residents' Assembly working groups and residents is retained; financial, material and other kinds of community support for groups and services that represent the residents and the Residents' Assembly; and the continuation of a community edition of the weekly News and Notes, an uncensored version of the long-standing publication that was taken over by the AVFO in December 2022. The *Voice of Auroville* journal, launched in April 2023, is itself further testimony to the resilience of the Auroville community.

Looking ahead

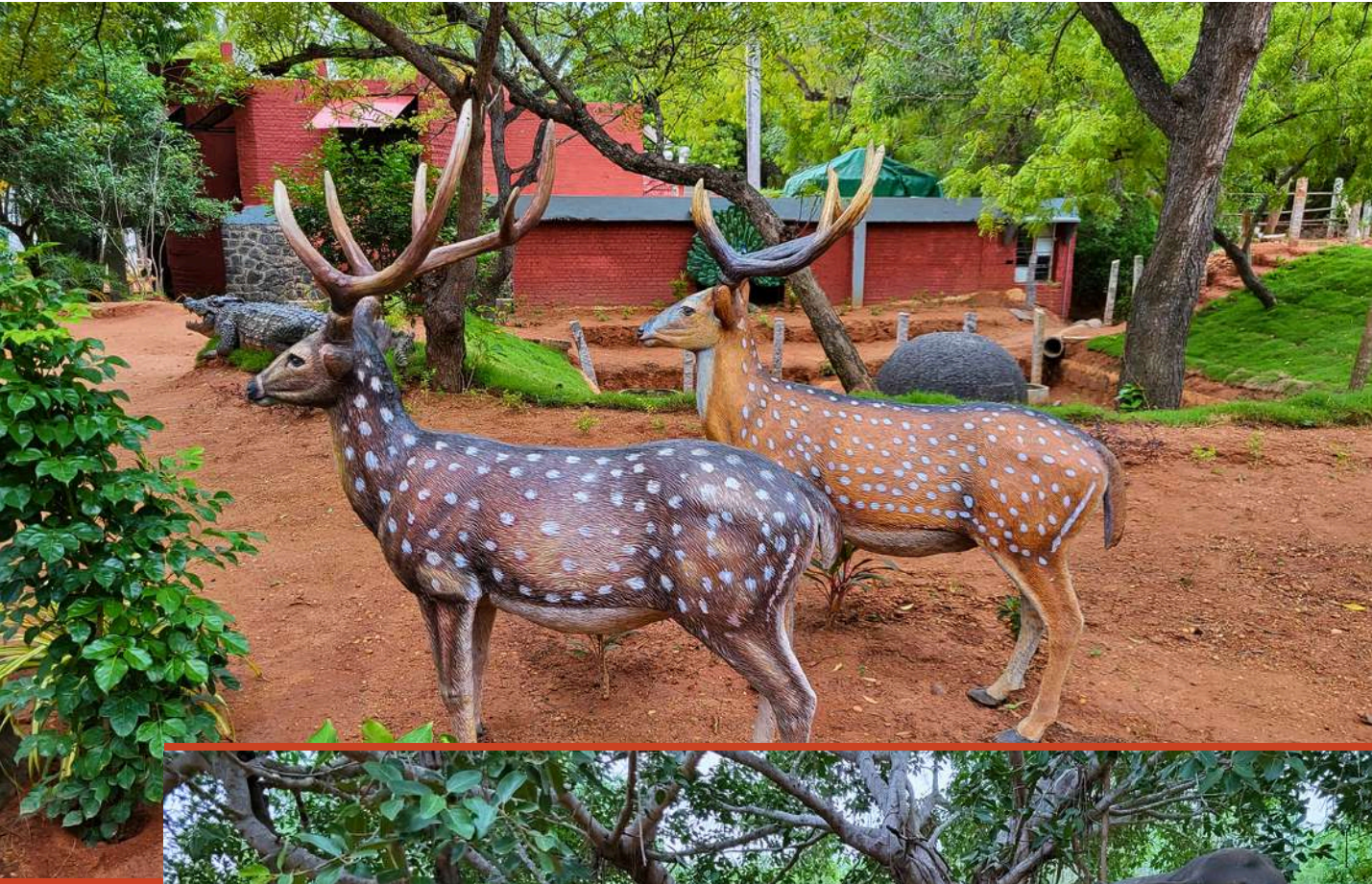
As Auroville navigates this critical period and advocates for collaborative best-practice urban development as a conscious way forward, the support of well-wishers worldwide remains crucial. You, as a reader, can play a vital role in bolstering Auroville and its residents through this crisis. Your awareness and active support make a real difference. To learn more about how you can help, please refer to the last page of this issue.

***Voice of Auroville editors,
November 2024***

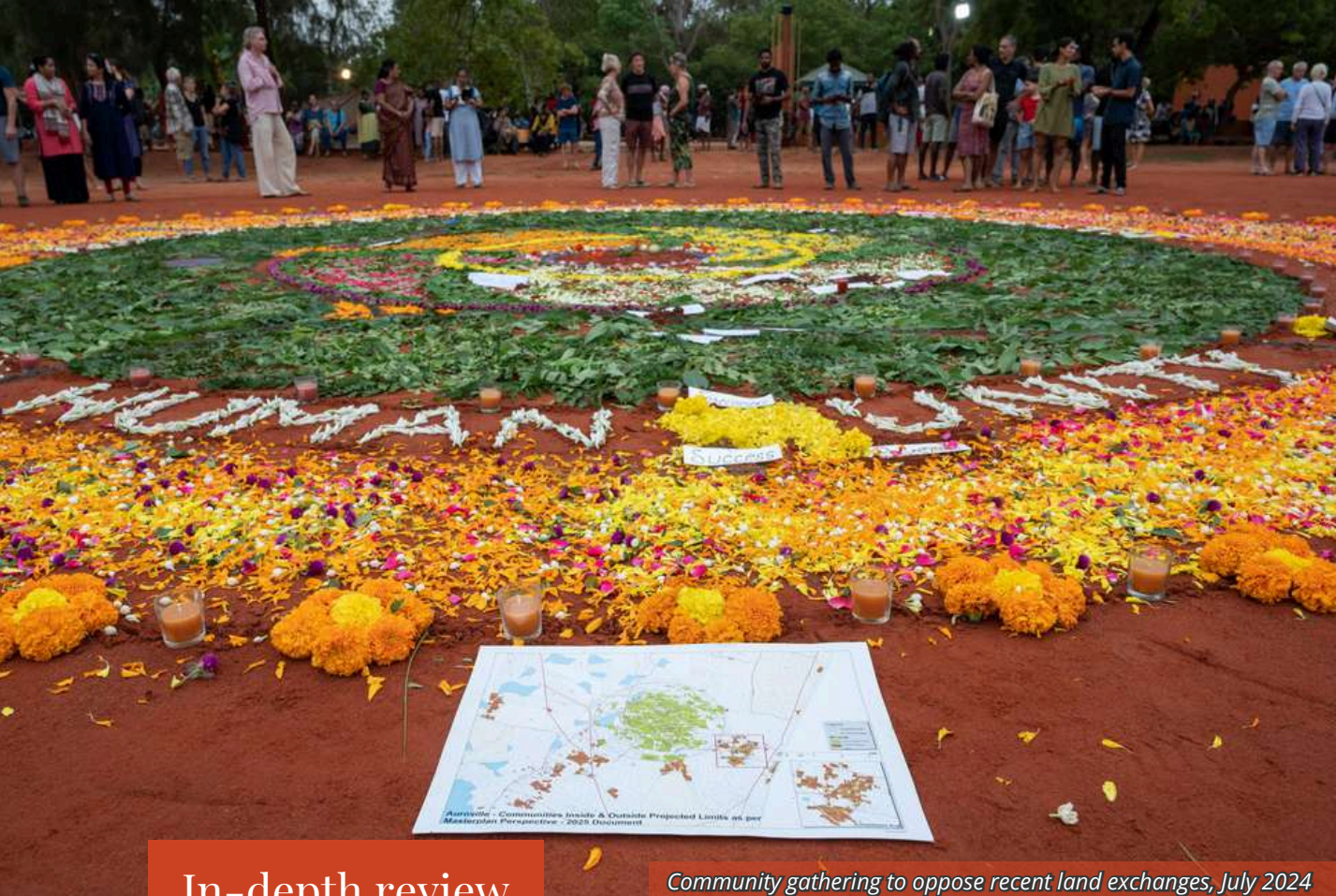


Community gathering to oppose recent land exchanges, July 2024

— *A cemented “wildlife”?*



Cement and resin statues in Bharat Nivas' new 'wildlife' gallery, June 2024



In-depth review

Community gathering to oppose recent land exchanges, July 2024

Land consolidation: at what cost?

Development, planning, and the Master Plan

Over the last two and a half years, significant parcels of valuable Auroville land have essentially been given away by the Auroville Foundation Office (**AVFO**) at highly undervalued rates in 'land exchange' deals. The justification for these highly questionable and opaque exchanges is that lands within Auroville's city centre must be consolidated urgently in order to implement an outdated Master Plan (formulated in 1999 and expiring in 2025), and to 'build the Crown', a conceptual corridor around Auroville's

city centre. These deals have caused enormous financial loss to the community - estimated at more than 240 crore rupees or US\$28 million - and have upended lives, livelihoods, and active land use in productive farms and residential communities. Moreover, the land deals, along with the AVFO's attempt to implement a questionable take on the outdated Master Plan, have bypassed all existing legal and community processes for land acquisition, land use and city planning.

— *Land consolidation*

Auroville is still missing 10% of land required for the City Area and over 50% of the surrounding Greenbelt, as outlined in the Perspective Master Plan. Land consolidation is indeed imperative to develop a unified township, and there has always been broad community support for this. Yet the AVFO's actions over the last few years clearly diverge from Auroville's commitment to collaboration, transparency and the objectives of long-term sustainability and best-practice urban planning.

What will be the outcome of such land consolidation? Should consolidation be done at the expense of Auroville's ecological, cultural and spiritual legacy?

Historical context

From early on, Auroville's founder, the Mother, encouraged Aurovilians to secure the land which would form the physical basis for the community and development of the city. The Mother and her chosen architect for Auroville, Roger Anger, had arrived at a galaxy design concept for the 'city of the future' in 1968, and land purchases were needed to realise this vision.

While much land was acquired - all through the generous offerings and hard work of residents and well wishers - funds were never sufficient to buy the required acres fast enough. From the start, the Indian government supported the vision of



Auroville in 1968

Auroville, but has never funded any land purchases. After Auroville became a legal entity in 1988 through the Auroville Foundation Act, land acquisition slowed down. Although funds were generated by fundraising initiatives such as the 1 Million Dollar Campaign, Acres for Auroville, and GreenAcres, the community now had to adhere to stringent purchasing rules and practices. This led to missed opportunities, as external speculators bought strategic lands, and later sold them to Auroville at high profits.

— Land consolidation

Aim and development of the Master Plan

The Master Plan was therefore designed to secure official protection for Auroville's physical development, and to safeguard greenbelt land from speculators while the city was being built. Through the 1990s, a working team of Aurovilians created a Perspective Master Plan - a broad policy framework that outlined a vision for the growth of Auroville, including general parameters and concept diagrams. It did not include detailed development proposals for the city area, and was therefore not a tool for implementation.

It was simply meant to be the framework for the next steps in urban planning: Detailed Development Plans, mobility plans and environmental studies. Given that the galaxy is an evolving concept, and that Auroville is an experimental city based on an evolutionary vision, the document emphasises that planning in Auroville needs to be flexible, and may involve trial and error. The Perspective Plan further specifies that it should be revisited every five years to assess progress and relevance:

"Although the Master Plan perspective 2025 provides a time horizon of 25 years, it will neither be traditional nor static and rigid. [...] The present momentum in Development and Environmental activities will be strengthened through a participatory Environmental Management process which will be integrated within all development, planning and urban design elements."

from the Master Plan (Perspective 2025) document, gazetted in 2010



'Dreamweaving the Crown' event, January 2022



Auroville Crown road before destruction, in 2019

— *Land consolidation*

This document was presented to the Residents' Assembly in 1999. After this initial document received feedback from the community, it was then reworked by a small group into The Auroville Universal Township Master Plan (Perspective 2025) and approved by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2001. However, this revised document was never endorsed by the community, nor was it ever approved by the Tamil Nadu Government.

Although this version of the plan became official when it was notified (published) in the Government of India Gazette in 2010, there have been long-standing concerns in the community regarding its legality, its lack of comprehensive community approval, and the need to revise the plan to reflect present-day on-the-ground realities.

Where are we now?

As previously stated, Auroville is still missing 10% of City Area land and more than half of the planned Greenbelt land. This gap certainly underscores the pressing need for ongoing land consolidation to develop a unified

township and protect essential resources like housing, water, forests, organic farms, and biodiversity.

While the community, in principle, appreciates administrative support from government for land acquisition to build the city, the AVFO's approach to land deals and urban planning have raised many concerns, some of which are explored here.

The community, via its Working Committee, has taken several actions to raise these concerns and address these issues, including: repeated appeals to the Governing Board, International Advisory Council and Ministry of Education; formal complaints to relevant authorities at all levels; legal notices sent to the District Registrar; engagement with the community; and the establishment of recommendations to ensure ethical land management.

Overview of concerns

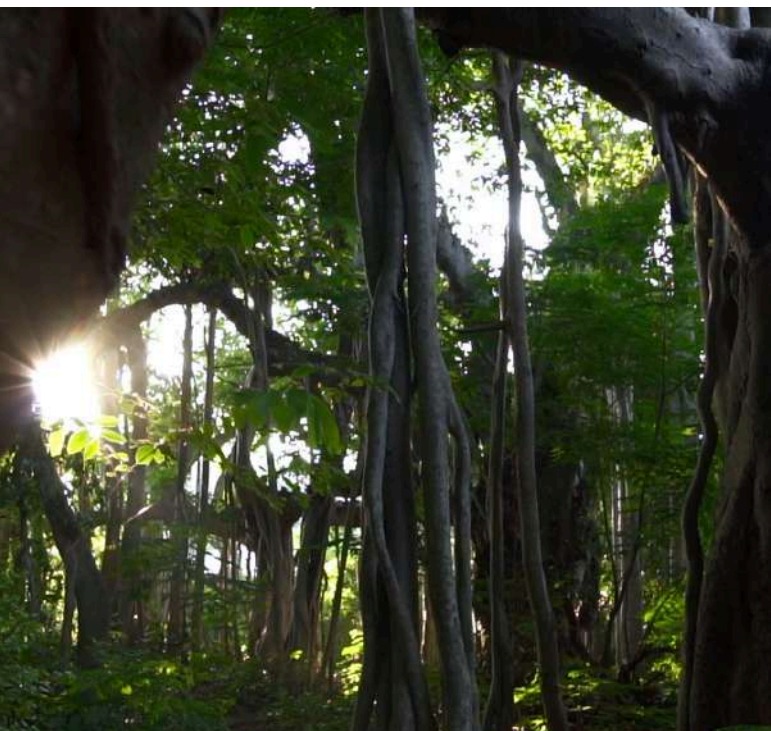
Disregard for required procedure

Serious questions about the non-transparency and wisdom of recent land exchange and acquisition practices by the AVFO have been raised by the representatives of the community and by other important stakeholders, such as members of the International Advisory Council, the Auroville International Board, and both local and national elected Indian officials.



Auroville Humanscapes community, 2021

— *Land consolidation*



Auroville forests are home to hundreds of TDEF indigenous species

Auroville lands valued between 4.4 to 8.7 crore rupees per acre (with market value of up to 13 crore rupees per acre) have been exchanged at significantly lower rates. Land parcels have effectively been given away at 1% of market value (at 7 lakh rupees per acre), resulting in losses of over 240 crore rupees (US\$28 million) to Auroville.

The land exchanges carried out by the AVFO over the last 2.5 years have been marked by complete opacity, lack of proper process and due diligence, and lack of consultation with the community and our neighbours. The deals have also bypassed and contravened the processes for independent land valuation implemented by the previous Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. Mohan Chunkath.

They further contravene the Auroville Foundation Rules of 1997 that require the AVFO to consult the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly. Moreover, it appears the AVFO does not even have the necessary permission from the Finance Ministry for property sales by autonomous bodies.

The blatant disregard for established procedure damages Auroville's reputation and the goodwill it has built up in the region, and globally, over the last 56 years. It is a sign of disregard towards all those who have contributed, in whatever capacity, towards the acquisition of these lands, and it may damage the trusting relationships built up over the decades between Auroville and donors.

The need to reflect on-the-ground realities and issues

Many land parcels within the projected 20 sq km Auroville Township are still owned by local neighbours, with whom Auroville has built respectful relationships as the original and ongoing inhabitants. Other parcels have been acquired by speculators, driving up land values. Disposing of Auroville lands, and implementing large-scale projects without updating the almost-expired Master Plan or preparing Detailed Development Plans, contradicts the Perspective Master Plan and paves the way for a chaotic form of development.

— *Land consolidation*

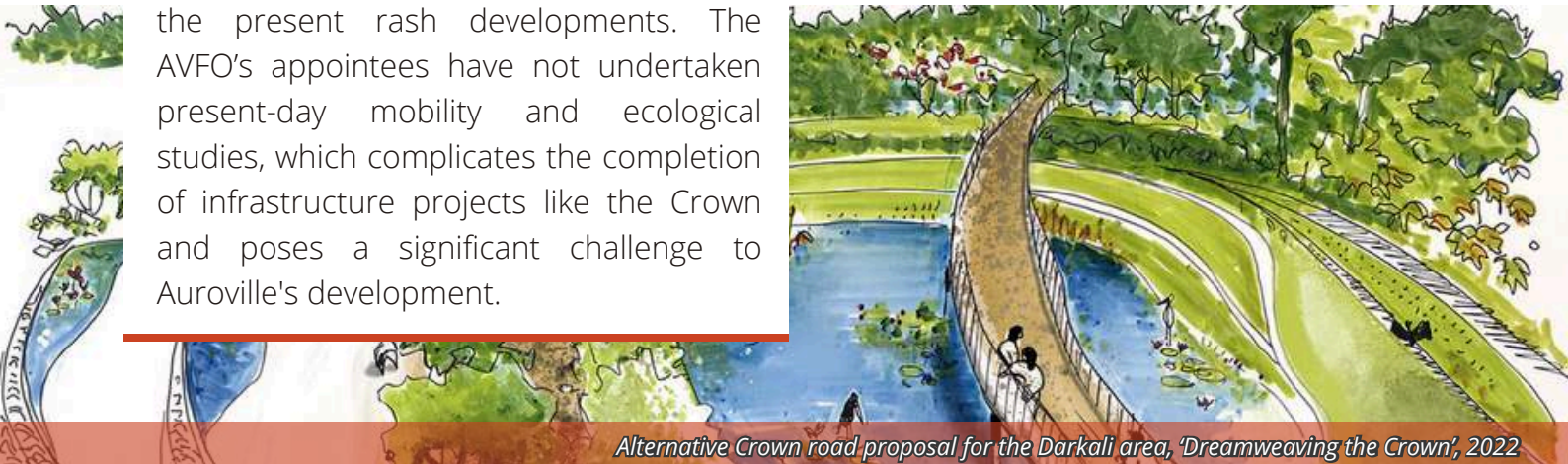
Rushed and poorly planned development also inflates land prices, making acquisition even more challenging. The market price of land along the Crown increased significantly due to the AVFO's emphasis on rapid completion of this element of the Master Plan, at all costs. Additionally, external speculators who bought strategic lands over the last years have recently exchanged these lands with the AVFO and reaped huge profits.

The need for flexible and collaborative planning

Effective planning for the exemplary community that Auroville strives to be needs a flexible and participatory approach, which integrates economic, social, institutional, physical, ecological, and spiritual elements. Auroville's own experts have conducted and collaborated on studies over the years which have examined urban design, water management, sewage systems, transportation infrastructure, as well as social and economic development. However, these have not been included in the present rash developments. The AVFO's appointees have not undertaken present-day mobility and ecological studies, which complicates the completion of infrastructure projects like the Crown and poses a significant challenge to Auroville's development.

Prior to the change in administration in 2021, community involvement was understood to be a cornerstone of Auroville's planning processes, and a goal in itself. The Residents' Assembly, consisting of all adult residents, plays a crucial role in initiating, leading and approving various development initiatives. Such a collective system can slow down decision-making. Yet community participation ensures that planning processes reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of Auroville's residents to arrive at a functional synthesis, and align with Auroville's broader goals of human unity and collaborative living.

The community's capacity for forward-looking collective urban planning has been demonstrated in initiatives like 'Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown', which brought together a sizeable group of Auroville architects, residents and urban planning experts in collaboration with the Vastu Shilpa Foundation, under the guidance of renowned architect Shri B. V. Doshi. [See *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 02.]



Alternative Crown road proposal for the Darkali area, 'Dreamweaving the Crown', 2022

— *Land consolidation*

The 2022 initiative drew on the demonstrated expertise and practical experience in the community, to integrate the galaxy concept and Master Plan framework in a way that emphasises best-practice urban design, while being sensitive to local and environmental conditions. Although the final presentations of the expert group's outcomes were well-received by all stakeholders, the AVFO never took the proposal forward.

Finally, Auroville is not an island. Whether all the intended lands have been acquired or not, Auroville and its founder, the Mother, have always encouraged a relationship of respect and mutuality with neighbouring communities impacted by Auroville's development. For example, water is of utmost importance: responsible urban planning should build upon Auroville's existing water harvesting and management measures, to address water security for the community and the region. This necessitates flexibility and inclusion of bioregional stakeholders in the development process.

Going forward

On the whole, the current AVFO's rigid interpretation of the Master Plan (Perspective 2025) seems both counter-productive and tone deaf. While much-needed land consolidation should continue, vital questions remain.

“

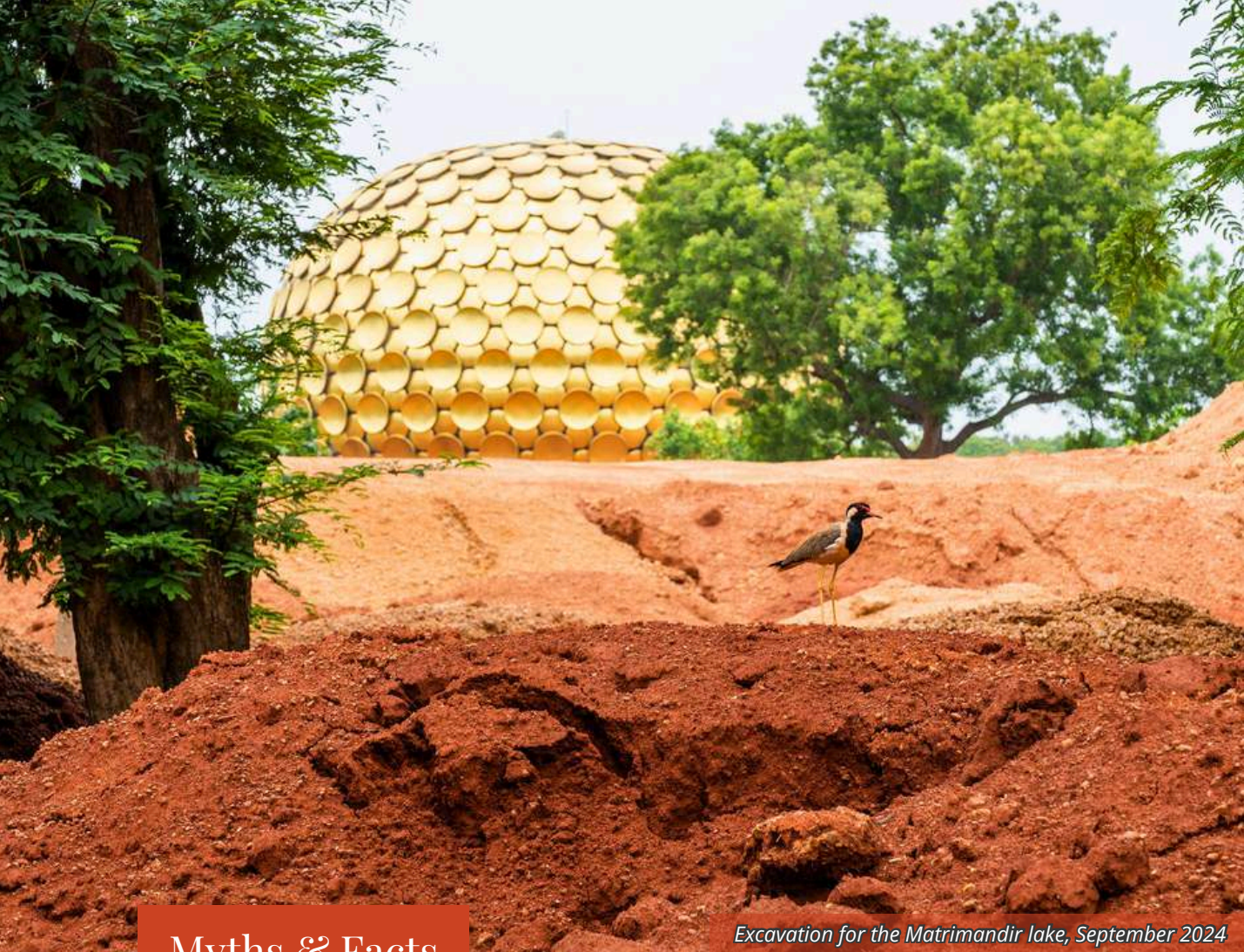
“Aurovilians during the past decade or so have been doing a great service in the improvement of the environment by taking suitable soil and moisture conservation measures and afforestation programmes as part of the rural development works. They have done excellent work in the above field not only in the lands belonging to Auroville but also helped in the improvement and proper management of other privately owned lands in the neighbourhood.”

H. Rajagopal Shetty,

Indian Forest Service, District Forest Officer,
Cuddalore Division, Cuddalore,
3rd April 1979

Shouldn't the Master Plan be updated as a matter of urgency? Does the need for land acquisition trump principles of transparency, consultation and good planning with the entire bioregion in mind? And ultimately, isn't there a way to achieve a unified township through collaborative urban development in a manner that upholds Auroville's vision of human unity and sustainable development?

***Voice of Auroville editors,
November 2024***



Myths & Facts

Excavation for the Matrimandir lake, September 2024

Countering misleading narratives

5

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

- **Myth: It is only a small and vocal minority that criticises the current Governing Board, the AVFO, and the AVFO's appointees.**

— Countering misleading narratives

Myth: It is only a small and vocal minority that criticises the current Governing Board, the AVFO, and the AVFO’s appointees.

Fact: While all of Auroville initially welcomed Dr Jayanti Ravi with enthusiasm when she was appointed Secretary to the Auroville Foundation Office (AVFO) in 2021, she quickly alienated many in the community with her top-down, authoritarian approach. The Residents’ Assembly (comprised of all residents) soon began using its legally-sanctioned platform to express the community’s active and vocal opposition to her many oppressive measures. This disagreement with Auroville’s takeover by an authoritarian administration has been echoed and amplified by Auroville supporters around the world. It is clearly disinformation to paint this opposition as the views of a ‘minority’ in the community.

Voice of the majority

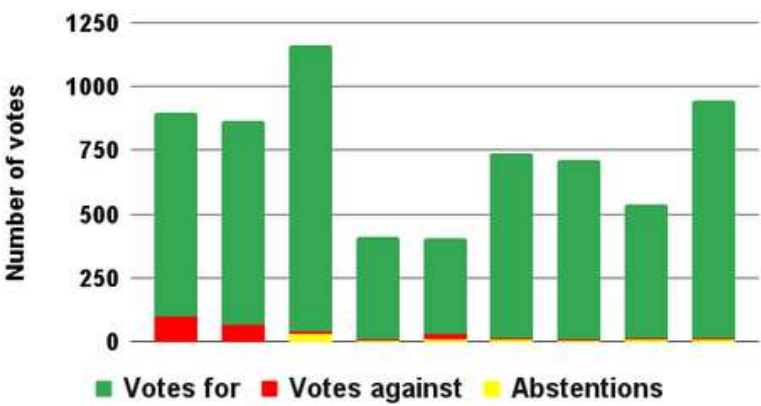
Over the last three years, Aurovilians have actively made use of community governance mechanisms to reaffirm their right and role in managing the internal affairs of Auroville, and to strongly assert opposition to the AVFO overstepping its authority and purview. Through the Residents’ Assembly, where every Aurovillian has a voice and a ‘vote’, a series of community-wide statements and decisions have demonstrated that a large

majority - on average 95.7% of residents who participated - do not support the destructive, divisive and repressive actions and approach of the AVFO and associated appointees. Nine community decisions and statements have been endorsed specifically in response to the crisis: two focused on city development; three voicing support for committees and groups selected by the Residents’ Assembly; and four as a direct response to AVFO orders which undermined the Residents’ Assembly’s crucial role as one of the three authorities of the Auroville Foundation.

Global support

Auroville International (AVI) - the worldwide network aimed at supporting Auroville’s development, with representation in 34 countries - has consistently expressed support for the Residents’ Assembly throughout the crisis. Over the last three and a half years, the AVI Board has written 12 public appeals addressed to

Residents’ Assembly Decisions



Decisions of the Residents’ Assembly between 2022 and 2024.
Those with the highest participation rates were explicitly opposing the AVFO’s destructive actions.

— *Countering misleading narratives*

the Governing Board and AVFO Secretary, Indian government ministers and UNESCO.

The first appeal was triggered by the AVFO's destruction of the Youth Centre in December 2021. Subsequently, the AVI Board has expressed "grave concerns" about the AVFO's many repressive actions, such as restrictions on freedom of speech, unwarranted visa restrictions, and "unjustified massive tree felling". It has appealed to the AVFO to remove censorship mechanisms, and expressed its appreciation for the "Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown 2022" urban planning process as a way forward for collaborative town development.

A first letter to UNESCO was sent in September 2022 specifically to protest against Dr Jayanti Ravi's plans to be the sole speaker representing Auroville at a UNESCO Paris ceremony to commemorate Sri Aurobindo. The AVI Board pointed out that Dr Ravi's "authoritarian and coercive approach to Auroville's development" was "disrespectful of all previous achievements of peace and inclusivity in Auroville's internal decision-making".

The AVI Board requested UNESCO to revise the program for the planned celebration and invite speakers "who enjoy the confidence of the Auroville residents", and who advocate for "peace, cultural diversity, respect for the environment and lifelong learning, in a spirit so similar to UNESCO's aims and ideals". Due to this appeal and other similar communications from around the world, UNESCO subsequently cancelled the event.

Most recently, AVI's September 2024 letter to Mme Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of UNESCO, expressed deep concern for Auroville's well-being. The letter acknowledged all that has been accomplished by Aurovilians over the last 56 years, and the positive impact the township has had for India and the world. The letter then summarised the severe repressive measures and adverse developments since the initial appointment of Dr Ravi and the current Governing Board. In its conclusion, AVI affirmed that the community's voice should be heard, and advocated for "the restoration of the previously well-balanced governance structure, as prescribed in the Auroville Foundation Act".

Current and former members of Auroville's International Advisory Council (IAC), along with other eminent international supporters of Auroville, have also voiced strong criticism of the AVFO and Governing Board through written statements and published interviews.



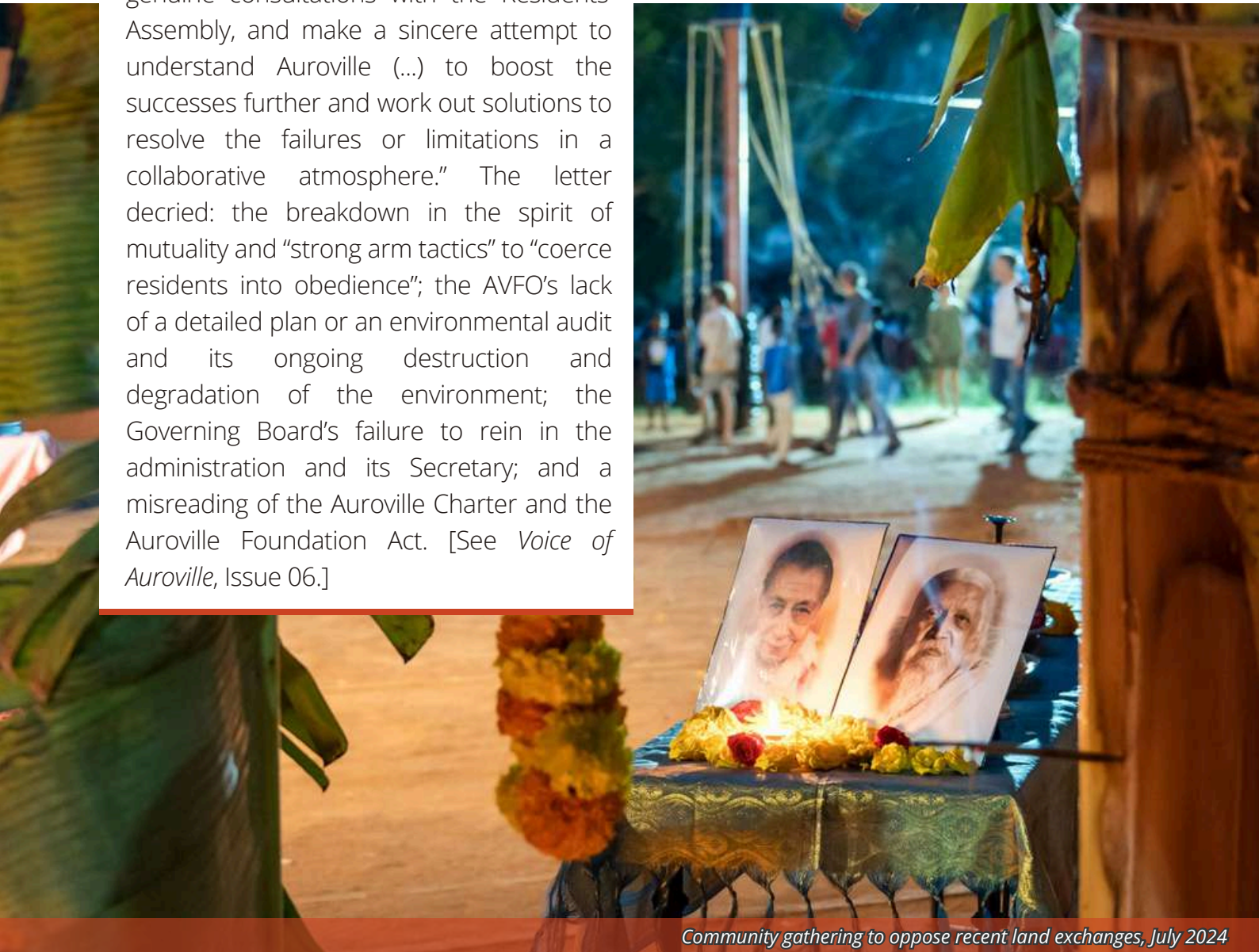
His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama in Auroville, 2009

— *Countering misleading narratives*

(The IAC is the third authority of the tripartite Auroville Foundation.) This includes the January 2024 statement by two current IAC members calling out misgovernance under Auroville’s current administration. The strongly worded statement was further endorsed by five former IAC members and three other eminent personalities. It 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.” The letter decried: the breakdown in the spirit of 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. [See *Voice of Auroville*, Issue 06.]

The majority view

In conclusion, opposition to the approach of the current AVFO, Governing Board, and their appointees has been voiced by many within Auroville, within India, and throughout the world via a broad range of communications and actions, expressing support for the Residents’ Assembly and a commitment to the vision of Auroville as a township dedicated to human unity and conscious development.



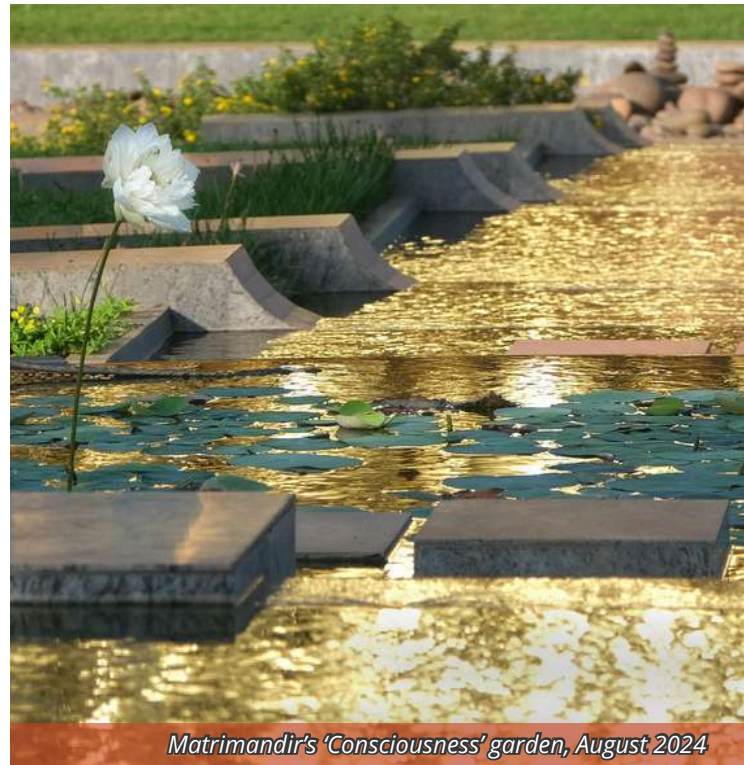
Community gathering to oppose recent land exchanges, July 2024

— *How to help?*

Thank you for reading our seventh 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:



Matrimandir's 'Consciousness' garden, August 2024

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.



*Widen your consciousness to the dimension
of the earth and you will have a place for
everything.*

– The Mother,
20 September 1971



Auroville's 50th anniversary, 28th February 2018



WORKING COMMITTEE
of the Residents' Assembly
AUROVILLE FOUNDATION

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