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Auroville Bulletin 71

Matrimandir Lake, Contribution linked to visa, Update on Satprem

A Summary of Events Happening in Auroville Today
Friday, 29th September 2023

Note: There are important actions to take at the end of each Bulletin, if you are reading on your phone you may need to click 'see more' to view the entire bulletin.

Please find a glossary of acronyms and terms used in this bulletin [here](#).

Urgent actions needed

- **Assist with the documentation of tree-cutting:** Instances of tree-cutting are happening every week across Auroville. It is important to document where and when this is happening; If you are available and willing to help with documentation, please get in touch with evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com **MM Neem Tree Vigil:** Residents have taken up a vigil to protect
- one of the old neem trees in danger of being cut to make way for the Matrimandir Lake. If you are willing to assist them in keeping their watch, please reach out to evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com. **Support for**
- **Maintenances:** An increasing number of Aurovilians have been cut off from their Maintenance, and are in need of support. For more information, please contact the BCC: bccoffice@auroville.services. If you wish to support the Farm or Forest Group as a whole, please contact us at evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com and we will redirect you as needed. **Financial support for legal fees:** If you can donate towards legal and delegation fees,
- please email evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com. Please see [here](#) for more information about why further financial assistance is necessary. **Help with the AVC room vigil :** Please participate! For nearly 8 months the community has held a 24/7 vigil in the AVC room in Town Hall. **More**
- **people are needed** to ensure the round-the-clock presence. Please contact avcouncil@auroville.services, WhatsApp 94430 03617 to sign up. See [here](#) for more information. **Join the Wednesdays for Auroville meetings:** There is a weekly community meeting
- held at the Tibetan Pavilion, every Wednesday 4:30-6:00 pm.

Urgent Topics

Matrimandir lake

On 19th September 2023, an information sharing evening was held at Savitri Bhavan regarding the Matrimandir (MM) lake construction project. A presentation was given by Michael Bonke, a friend of Auroville who is involved in both planning and funding the MM lake. A number of residents have expressed concerns about the recent excavation of the second section of the MM lake leading to the destruction of a large number of mature trees. The main concerns are regarding environmental impact of the fast-tracked plans for both Auroville and the bioregion, the lack of transparency and consultation with the residents and other experts. Some residents are holding a vigil to halt the felling of these trees until a more environmentally sound option for lake development is explored. This construction and tree felling is also occurring during the NGT rule to halt all new development in the Master Plan area.

Amongst those expressing concerns are the chief engineer of the test lake, Jan Imhoff. Previously he [questioned](#) why the second section of the lake is going ahead when evaluation of the data collected from the test lake has still not been completed. The timescale for this was originally set to be three years. He also [raised concerns](#) regarding planning approval, which is significant given the effect that the MM lake will have on both Auroville itself and the surrounding villages. In his most [recent report](#) he raises several further “points to address”, such as the importance of an Environmental Impact Assessment, clarification of how the lake will be filled with water, and who will be the responsible body for the project execution.

Satprem has also written a [report](#) noting his concerns regarding the project, as well as [providing data](#) showing that the lake cannot be filled with rainwater alone. Amongst other observations, he argues that the proposed desalination plant might never be built or finished, due to the environmental impact and because the pipeline would need to go through large sections of privately owned land.

At the presentation evening, Michael Bonke [presented a plan](#) for the MM lake that is highly experimental and technologically complex. His team recently designed an experimental “under-water-foil-cushion” to serve as an underwater storage unit, the intention being that, while the main body of the lake will be filled with rain water, several of these storage units will be filled with desalinated water, stored at the bottom of the MM lake, and used to provide the city area with drinking water. He also outlined plans for uphill power storage as part of the lake design.

During [an open question and answer session](#) with Michael Bonke, a number of residents requested that information and data regarding the project be shared with the community, as well as independent expert evaluation on the project. No commitment was made during the evening to share data, open up plans to outside evaluation, or to allow community participation.

Regarding concerns about the potential toxicity of the water due to the 10m depth, Michael Bonke outlined that the design of the lake will allow wind to create a current in the water which will prevent toxicity. However, he admitted that the assumption that there will be a current is theoretical, and they will not know for sure if it will work until after the lake is completed.

The presentation ended with a section regarding the recent destruction of trees in the MM gardens. He stated that it was not possible to integrate any trees on islands or peninsulas within the lake as this would break the current and lead to stagnant water in the lake.

In a resident’s [open letter](#) to Michael Bonke, written after the presentation evening, it was asked

that he consider criteria other than speed of construction, such as responsible planning, trust, collaboration, beauty and whether the proposed lake plan is in accordance with Mother's vision. For other documents related to the MM lake construction, please see [here](#).

AVFO asks for 'No Dues Certificate' in order to receive visa

Residents applying for a visa letter of recommendation (LoR) will not have their request sent to the AVFO until they receive a 'no dues certificate' from the AVFO 'BCC'. This is a newly created document which confirms that they are paying their Auroville financial contribution. If it is found that the person has not paid their contribution in full, then the request for a LoR will not be sent until the deduction is set up, and up to three years of 'back payments' are collected in full - which could amount to over 1 lakh rupees.

Previously, there was recognition that a person's contribution to Auroville could be paid in kind. In the [reflections shared by the RA BCC in April 2023](#), it was noted that the AVFO 'BCC' were taking a very different approach to the collection of individual contributions than had been taken by previous groups. They stated "It is important to distinguish between a contribution and a tax ... contributions are waived because the individuals are working for free, or previously made large donations to Auroville (and are now aged), or are between jobs and without resources. The current approach seems to be to administer the individual contributions as a tax, without understanding or honouring this human element." The action also specifically targets Aurovilians who rely on receiving a visa LoR in order to stay in Auroville, namely non-Indian nationals or those without OCI status.

Satprem's expulsion update

On 19th June Satprem was notified by the FRRO Chennai that he had to leave the country on or before 1st July, although he holds a valid visa until December 2025, since the Secretary had apparently withdrawn his recommendation to work and live in Auroville. While the Secretary never answered Satprem's request for a reason, the AVFO 'WCom' published a list of false accusations that were [countered by him](#)

Satprem went to Delhi with some Auroville friends and a member of the RA WCom and met several officials and secretaries at the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Education. His case was presented along with hundreds of support letters from around the world and pertinent facts regarding his stay and work in Auroville and India during the last 34 years.

The officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs said that they will look into the matter and send an update. Satprem stayed in India and is back in Auroville now, waiting for a final decision from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

In the interim, the AVFO groups have made several attempts to block the functioning of the Auroville Earth Institute (AVEI), founded by Satprem. This is unfortunate as AVEI is one of the world's foremost centres for excellence in earthen architecture, and a leader in the research, development, promotion and transfer of earth-based building technologies. AVEI has worked in 39 countries to promote and disseminate knowledge in earth architecture, and has garnered 15 awards for its work (4 international awards and 11 national awards). For more information on the Auroville Earth Institute, please see [AVEI at a glance](#) or visit their website <http://www.earth-auroville.com>

Other Updates and Information

TDC reports on tree-cutting

The RA TDC are continuing to document and report on instances of tree cutting across Auroville. Their [reporting](#) shows how, on 31st August 2023, 15 trees were felled on Auroville land adjacent to the Language Lab by a person who claimed to be hired by the AVFO 'Land Board'. This person then removed the cut wood from the site "without the intervention of the Auroville Land Board". This action brought the total number of trees felled between June-August 2023 on the proposed Crown trajectory to over 50.

In the RA TDC [report](#) dated 7th September 2023, they show that at least 378 trees have been cut on the proposed Crown and Outer Ring Road trajectories since the NGT judgement of April 2022, in direct contravention to the court's verdict. This does not include the young trees that were cut for Mothers Flower Garden, the trees felled along the Crown in December 2021, or the clearing of Revelation Forest. Nor does it include the many mature trees that were cut on Michael Bonke's land. Their News & Notes [announcement](#) that accompanied the report stated "these are ecologically valuable assets of Auroville which contribute to our green infrastructure ... The Auroville forest and green cover are a precious asset not only to Auroville, but also for the surrounding areas".

On 3rd September 2023, banyans and palmyras that were beside the Crown road opposite Sante were cut. Palmyras are the state tree of Tamil Nadu and steps have been taken by the state government to protect them. A further [report](#) points out "a narrowing or diversion of the road by a few centimetres would have allowed the trees to remain".



Ayarpadi Farm threat removed

In July 2023, an [email](#) was received by Ayarpadi farm demanding that they hand over “the land parcel that you are farming in situated next to Windarra, as well as the service farm” so that the land could be reallocated to “Aurovillians [sic] who have undergone 6 months of training at Unity Farm”. The Farm Group responded with a [letter](#) which stated that they were taken aback by the request, going on to say: “We wonder why you want to take a part of a good functioning farm to experiment with. Ayarpadi has been consistently producing field crops on this part of their farm.” The farm produces many grains that are in short supply in Auroville such as paddy, peanuts, ragi and sesame, as well as being the main supplier of boiled rice to Solar Kitchen.

Ayarpadi Farm has now received an [email](#) from the AVFO 'Farm Service', which stated that they would no longer be considering Ayarpadi Farm land for reallocation.

Errata from Bulletin 70

In Bulletin 70, the pioneers of Forecomers were misnamed as Bob and Diana Lawless. The correct names of the Forecomers pioneers are Robert and Deborah Lawlor. Apologies from the Bulletin team for this mistake in identity.

Thank you

Those involved would like to express deep gratitude for all the donations, small and big, that have been sent to support the legal and other community actions in the past 2 years. Thank you also to those who have found other ways to support the community. As the legal and diplomatic work continues, as well as assistance to support those Aurovilians who have had their finances impacted by the actions of the AVFO and their ‘working groups’, continued financial help is very welcome. If you are able to offer support, please contact evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com.

Changing the narrative

In June 2023, the RA WCom shared [via massbulletin](#) their [response](#) to the AVFO 'WCom' [Annual Report](#) August 2021 - August 2022. The report contained a number of often repeated narratives that continue to be spread by the supporters of the AVFO to justify the ongoing takeover of Auroville's assets. As the RA WCom notes "With the benefit of nearly 12 months of hindsight since the end date of this report, it is clear that many of these erroneous statements do not reflect the reality of the situation, however, we still continue to hear many of these narratives being repeated." The response addressed numerous errors in the AVFO 'WCom' annual report, the most common of which will be shared in upcoming editions of the Bulletin.

The original statements from the AVFO 'WCom' are presented in italics, followed by the RA WCom responses.

Aurovilians "have taken possession" of Auroville's lands

"The first generation of Aurovilians took possession of the donated lands, fenced it, and gave it community names, implying that the areas belong to them and they determined who could live there and who not. This attitude has huge repercussions on claiming (similar as possession) areas, stewardship, accountability of activities, and excluding other Aurovilians in those areas etc. Moreover, these Aurovilians were over-represented in the governing groups like the Working Committee, FAMC, and the Auroville Council, formerly called 'Executive Committee'. The main strategy was that within these groups the (financial) decisions were taken in favor of stewardship, maintenances, loans, taxes, donations, media, entry, land-acquisition etc. With regard to what suited them well while pushing development into a non- Galaxy- Masterplan direction. One of the most significant result of this constellation, is that growth became the big loser. Even after 54 years Auroville hardly managed to have 3200 residents. It should be at least 10-fold."

Auroville has been developed according to its financial capacity and available funds, mainly contributed by residents and well-wishers from around the world. This statement appears to be a blatant attempt to tarnish the first generation of Aurovilians, which is disrespectful to the energy and resources that were put into making the area liveable for the many future residents. Aurovilians over the past 54 years have put in their personal resources, time and effort to create a large number of units and services that support the growth of the community based on its needs. Some examples are schools, health centers, outreach programmes, grocery outlets, farms, and forests, all for the benefit of the Auroville community and beyond. Painting those achievements as complete failures and attempts to "own" the community is willfully misguided, and extremely disrespectful. The whole community benefits from the work of each member - to name these developments as anti-growth is antithetical to their very nature. As for dealing with "ownership", which is discouraged in Auroville, many initiatives are helping to address this challenge, and that of an alternative economy: the principle of stewardship, the maintenance system, the Free Store and 'Library of Things', the Pour Tous cooperative, and more.

We have observed a rather progressive and steady growth in Auroville over the last decades. This pace was required for Auroville to accommodate the needs of the new members of the community - from housing to schooling to farming etc.

Media & Other Links

- **Voice of Auroville journal, Issue 03, September 2023:** <https://auroville.media/voa/>
- **Auroville News Podcast, Episode 4:** <https://auroville.media/podcasts/>
- **Times of India: Lets make the Cooum swimmable** <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/lets-make-the-cooum-swimmable-again/articleshow/103728086.cms>

About us

We are a group of Aurovilians who are actively involved in understanding the current crisis situation in Auroville in order to find a way forward together.

We stand for:

- Respecting our community processes for decision-making
A collaborative approach in developing Auroville using integrated methods such as the
- Dreamweaving initiative
- Transparency and fairness in the organisation of Auroville
- Creating unity with our diverse voices
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If you wish to know more, the website <https://auroville.media/> contains a great deal of information on the current situation.

Please note that our previous bulletins can be found at this link: <https://linktr.ee/evolvinggalaxy>

With regard to future actions, those who have particular skills such as writing, social media, film editing etc are welcome to write to evolvinggalaxy@gmail.com. Also feel free to share with us information, questions or suggestions.

We hope this has been helpful. Let's keep working to find a way to bring us closer together to the beautiful dream of human unity in Auroville. We can do it... together.

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