

Self-appraisals by the Working Committee and Auroville Council

The term of office of the members of the Working Committee and Auroville Council ends on June 22nd. Both groups have published an appraisal of their functioning over the past two years. Here we share excerpts from these self-appraisals.

The Working Committee's self-appraisal

The mandate of the Working Committee is to represent the Resident's Assembly in interactions with Governing Board, International Advisory Council and the Secretary of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, in collaboration with relevant working groups.

Our first and foremost guidance in executing our mandate is not only the Auroville Charter but also the Auroville Foundation Act. The Act is primarily to support and help the development of Auroville in accordance with the Charter. We believe one of the main responsibilities of the Working Committee is to assist the Residents' Assembly to express the inherent strength of the Residents' Assembly and its decision-making bodies to such an extent that it can function and sustain itself independently from any outside decision-making functionaries, however well-intentioned they may be.

The Governing Board and the Human Resource Development Ministry have confirmed that Auroville is an autonomous body. This opinion has also been given by two senior lawyers of the country. Although the legal interpretation has been clarified, there is much work to be done to ensure this is reflected in actual practice on the ground.

Auroville eventually can only be governed by its own strength and wisdom while incorporating all that is of inherent value from any part of the world. But the final decision has to be ours.

One of the tasks in this regard is to cultivate and maintain a mutually-constructive and respectful relationship with the Governing Board, International Advisory Council and Foundation Office. This has been particularly challenging with the present Secretary of the Governing Board. The Foundation Office has a potentially positive role to play in Auroville's development and growth but it certainly is not currently acting as a catalyst to achieve the independence which we understand to be the underlying principle of the Act. In fact it almost appears to be the opposite of what it is supposed to be. This then becomes a contentious situation in which it is difficult to navigate and guide the community to be more self-sustaining and independently functioning. In addition, there are times when we, in Auroville, undermine this principle ourselves, as when some Aurovilians try and influence their project initiatives directly with the Secretary, and/or members of the Governing Board and its Finance Committee.

A second aspect of the mandate is to maintain cordial relations with the Central and State Government. While we have maintained and strengthened contacts, especially at the Central Government level, more work needs to be done on the level of State government. Recognition of the Master Plan at the Central Government level has been achieved by its gazetting by the Governing Board. At the State level there is a move by the government to change the Town and Country Planning Act which could be favorable for 'institutions' like Auroville.

Another task is the coordination of the relations with the surrounding villages and improving the contacts with

the local authorities. We have tried to do so by initiating a process whereby regular meetings are held with the local authorities, also involving the Tahsildar and the Collector, and three meetings have been called in two years. These meetings are very important for Auroville and we hope they will be followed up further.

We have also have established and maintained a good working relationship with the local police, in collaboration with the Security Service. We are particularly appreciative of the interactions and support we have had with the Director General and Assistant Director General of Police, Chennai, and the District Superintendent of Police, Koot Road.

Yet another important aspect of our work is to strengthen the role of the Residents' Assembly. We have been working towards this goal by improving communication. We provided an open door hour three times a week for any resident to present their issues or topics for our deliberation and follow-up. We tried our best to ensure that written communications received at least an acknowledgment, and that all those who requested an interaction with us received one. There was a conscious effort to write our reports in an informative, open and friendly manner, while still respecting privacy and other concerns. The team has had regular interactions with the other working groups of the Resident's Assembly. Lastly, the way we, with the help of the Council and RAS, facilitated the selection of the new team for L'Avenir d'Auroville, was done with the intention of involving the Residents' Assembly.

Although we may not have made as much progress in this goal as we would have liked and is needed, we believe there is some positive change in the air.

The issue of transparency needs special mentioning. The bulk of our work is related to issues involving Auroville and external entities (individuals, organizations, government offices, etc.). However, there are instances where issues of an internal nature are also brought to our table, and these often require collaboration with other working groups, services, and individuals.

Ideally, all community processes would be totally transparent, and we firmly believe in the necessity of achieving this goal. Unfortunately, the current reality makes this difficult because untimely information can undermine certain processes that are still ongoing, and some individuals take things out of context and confuse matters. Many situations and processes are very complex and sensitive, so we weigh how much and when to share information and decisions with the community. However, we do try to regularly remind residents that if they are sincerely interested in a particular topic they can come to our office and get more details than we feel comfortable of sharing in an open forum.

Our time in the Working Committee has been extremely challenging on many levels, exhilarating at certain times and discouraging at others. But it has also been a very interesting and eye-opening experience, a prime example of unending education through the yoga of work.

The Auroville Council's self-appraisal

Since the beginning of our tenure, the team has worked reasonably well. It was possible to find mutual agreement between us and work through consensus, however long it may have taken at times to arrive at it. None of us had any particular agenda in mind and that is probably an important condition for a consensus.

Most of the members of the present Council were quite new to this type of task and it took us a long time to understand the complexity of the job and the full nature of the problems and how to address them effectively. We felt as if we were thrown in at the deep end, with no continuity with the previous group except for the saving grace of our secretary Sathya's presence as Council secretary.

Therefore, keeping in mind that it takes members quite some time before they can be pro-active within the group and contribute significantly, we think it would be advisable to renew some of the members every year, in order to allow new members time to get acquainted with the work, or to allow some members of the previous group to stay on with the new group for a period of a few months to ensure continuity in the work. Having a totally new group, new to its job every two years, is not a good working formula. The members spend half their time reinventing the wheel.

The mandate of the Council is very wide and diverse, but more than 90% of our time was taken up by conflict resolution. The most essential part of our mandate, which concerns finding living ways to manifest the ideal of Auroville, is thus continually put on hold as our time is consumed by conflict resolutions. To avoid this overburdening of the Council, we propose that a Conflict Resolution cell be created under the Council with permanent members having the required profile to assist the Council in this aspect of the work.

Most of these conflicts are irrelevant to Auroville's aims and ideals. Most of the people involved just want recognition that they are right and that the other party is wrong. We have therefore come up with a set of requirements for bringing issues to us that puts the emphasis on the individuals involved working towards a true solution.

We are convinced of the impossibility of arriving at a true solution if the parties in a

conflict do not want to make the necessary efforts to arrive at a mutual understanding. It is a progress that we cannot do for them and any decision taken then is a decision by default, not the truest one. It is far below what The Mother expected of us, when she mentioned several times the need to arrive at a point where what is antagonistic becomes complementary. As long as this effort is not made, we are not in the context of a society of unending education and constant progress.

Most of the Council members already have a full-time job and therefore cannot offer the needed time to follow-up on all of the issues which are generally brought to us when all else has failed and the situation has reached crisis point. This is hardly a way to function serenely. Help is needed to assist the Council members in their task by preparing and following up on the issues, as well in keeping a channel of communication open with the community and with the other working groups.

One of the areas where attention is needed is the communication/information aspect. The Residents Assembly Service needs to emerge as the group responsible for seeing to it that a living communication between the community at large and the working groups is maintained, perhaps through a certain minimum number of general meetings a year. A culture of consultation on key topics through forums with concerned community members who are determined to seek a comprehensive way forward and to stay with the process, also needs to be nurtured.

The Council mandate is obsolete in its wording. It is too vast and vague. It deserves to be more accurately formulated. There is a confusion of functions because the Council is asked to act as an executive body implementing decisions, as a judiciary in conflict resolution and as a supreme court of appeal in deciding conflicts between individuals or between individuals and working groups. We need to separate these functions because they have to be independent of each other and because they require people with different profiles and abilities.

To summarise, what is needed is to take organisational steps to allow more availability of the Council, more facilitated transition between two Councils, more coordination with other groups and more communication with the Community.

Challenges, recommendations and reflections of the Working Committee

Challenges

- ◆ The WC tends to do a lot of firefighting, which doesn't leave much time and energy for process/policy work that could benefit Auroville over a longer period.
- ◆ Too much time and energy is spent on dealing with lack of cooperation by the Secretary.
- ◆ There are fears in the Community: threats have been made, resulting in people unwilling to speak out openly at meetings or to the Working Committee for fear of visa or other security concerns.
- ◆ Residents sometimes bypassing the community processes and going to the Secretary or other non-resident individuals and bodies, which creates unnecessary confusion, misunderstandings and bad will.
- ◆ Fragmentation: different groups wanting to go ahead in different directions; lack of trust and real unity.

Reflections about our Community that add to the challenges of working groups

- ◆ Some feel that once being announced as an 'Aurovillian', they are free to do as they wish. We believe our community would do well to consider a change in the terminology we use in this regard: when someone completes their Newcomer period, they could be announced as Resident of Auroville, rather than Aurovillian. In our view, becoming Aurovillian is a lifelong process and cannot be achieved in any fixed period of time – we are all aspiring Aurovilians.

- ◆ There are those who seem to have forgotten what it means to be an Aurovillian; the basic aims and values are not so strongly shared anymore. How to pragmatically strengthen our spiritual cohesiveness?
- ◆ Although coming together is part of Auroville's ideals, we often don't. What can be done?
- ◆ We in Auroville are often very hard on each other, and focus too much on the negative rather than the positive aspects of people and situations.

Recommendations for the future team

- ◆ It would be very useful to have a member of the WC, or a person who would be assigned by the WC as its representative, as a member of the Finance Committee of the Governing Board. This would be more fruitful and adequate to the situation rather than engaging in a continuous tug-of-war with the office of the Secretary.
- ◆ There could be one 'Village Relations' office so that the present confusion of different Auroville dealings with the villages would stop. Strengthening of the Village Development Councils could also help in this direction.
- ◆ Ensure the presence and involvement of people who are part of the processes and yet can focus on concise, clear communication and coordination, including follow-up on decisions actions, issues, etc.
- ◆ Make use of resource persons with different views to help find acceptable solutions, either informally or by forming subgroups / task-forces.

Principles guiding the decisions of the Auroville Council

- ◆ There is no personal private possession of Auroville assets, whether of land, building or economic activities. Buying or possessing private land belonging to the Master plan is in direct contradiction with this principle.
- ◆ People who have stopped living or working in Auroville for more than 5 years are not considered Aurovilians anymore (with the exception of children studying abroad). Their housing unit will be managed by the Housing Service.
- ◆ An Aurovillian cannot have the usage nor the stewardship of more than one housing asset. Privately renting an Auroville housing asset is not allowed.
- ◆ People who live in Auroville are expected to contribute either in work, kind or money.
- ◆ The use of physical violence or threat of physical violence is forbidden in Auroville.
- ◆ There is no exchange of money or as little as possible. Work is not performed for earning one's living but to serve and to progress. The Auroville economy is based on the act of mutual giving and not on commercial exchange.
- ◆ Aurovilians do not belong to any ideology, race, group, religion or nationality but to humanity as a whole, and therefore cannot represent the interests of any ideology, race, group, religion or nationality within Auroville.
- ◆ Aurovilians do not engage in illegal activities in regard to the laws of India.
- ◆ To become an Aurovillian is an individual choice. One does not become Aurovillian by birth or marriage. Children who have grown up in Auroville will make the choice at the age of 18 to commit or not to Auroville ideals.
- ◆ To be Aurovillian doesn't guarantee any right to free housing or a job. Each one has to find his/her place according to his own internal truth. The basic principle is that the more one is in contact with one's soul, the more the material conditions are gathered around his/her true needs. (See: Mother – To Be a True Aurovillian)
- ◆ Maintenance, health care, food allowance and other collective services are provided only to those who contribute to Auroville's development in work, kind or money.
- ◆ To be an Aurovillian is to accept Mother's invitation to collaboration and being of goodwill. Conflicts have to be solved through common understanding aiming at a reconciling harmony.
- ◆ Although Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are considered as the living inspiration behind the creation and development of Auroville, no religious dogma or set of orthodox beliefs can be founded in their name or in the name of their disciples, nor any authority be derived from them.