

THE NEW
INDIAN EXPRESS

INDULGE

50 years of Auroville, and ground reality at the City of Dawn



Jaideep Sen

| Published: 23rd February 2018 06:00 AM

Matrimandir



A deeply pacific sense of silence is the norm at Matrimandir, Auroville, Pondicherry. In the queue leading into the magnificent dome-shaped edifice, there isn't so much as an audible sigh

among the guests, shuffling over a spiral staircase to be ushered into the central meditation hall, called the “Inner Chamber”.

For a first-timer, the experience can seem other-worldly, and almost transcendental. The first step into the chamber of immaculate white marble can appear to instantly grant one the power of levitation. At the centre of this circular room is the jewel of Auroville — a 70cm crystal-glass globe, said to be the largest optically-perfect orb of its kind in the world.

The crystal globe, for the technically minded, isn't one to peer into for visions of the future. Rather, it serves an elementary purpose, suffusing the rays of sunlight that are electronically guided to fall on it, through an opening at the apex of the spherical chamber.

The result is a glowing ball that radiates natural lighting, in whose seemingly divine presence, you get to sit cross-legged, for a session of meditation.



The crystal globe in the Inner Chamber

A duality in perspective

The story of Matrimandir, literally “Temple of The Mother”, is astounding to reflect upon, as it prepares for its 50th anniversary this February 28th.

The Auroville community was the dream of the Frenchwoman Mirra Alfassa, addressed as "The Mother" by her followers, who settled in Pondicherry in 1920, at the end of World War I, and founded an ashram based on the spiritual teachings of Sri Aurobindo.

At the Matrimandir Visitor's Centre, in videos and literature based on the Mother's lessons, one gets the impression of a "higher ideal", with expressions describing Auroville as "A kingdom of God", "The cradle of a new world", "A bridge between past and the future", and "A centre of accelerated evolution".

But the reality of Auroville is a long way from the ideals presented by the Mother, admits the writer Akash Kapur, whose book *Auroville: Dream and Reality, An Anthology* serves to observe the community's anniversary.

"The context is essential," reasons Akash, who grew up in Auroville and now lives there, having returned in 2003 after a decade overseas. "Auroville's ideals are the ideological, philosophical and existential underpinnings of the community, it's *raison d'être*," he offers. "But appreciating Auroville requires a certain duality in perspective. It means, recognising and cherishing the ideals, while at the same time recognising that the city as it exists today."



Akash Kapur

A higher, deeper divinity

In many ways, Auroville does keep up the Mother's promise of an Ideal City and a model universal township, the charter for which she laid down in 1966. In her eyes, Auroville was to be a place "where men and women from all countries will be able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities".

The Mother christened the town Auroville, to imply "The City of Dawn", derived from the French word "aurore", while her charter, along with handfuls of soil from 124 nations and 23 Indian states, was placed in a marble lotus-shaped urn, at the centre of Auroville, to mark the laying of its foundation, on February 28, 1968.

Fifty years on, there's still a long way to go, says Akash, a son of Dilip Kapur, the entrepreneur behind Hidesign, the quintessentially Pondicherry brand of leather goods and hospitality. "It's important to look reality squarely in the face," urges Akash, "to recognise our shortcomings, limitations and challenges we face both as humans and as a community. But recognising our limits does not in any way preclude admiring the ideals we are aiming towards."

In particular, the viewpoint that "The days of religions are over", based on a declaration by Sri Aurobindo, does gain relevance in the present day. "Auroville is supposed to be a place beyond existing, organised religion," agrees Akash.

He adds, "What's interesting is that this move beyond religion emphatically does not exclude spirituality or spiritual pursuit. So there is an attempt to move beyond organised religion, while still searching for something higher and deeper—what some might call a 'divinity'."



A historical shot

of Matrimandir, courtesy Auroville Archives

'The city is everywhere'

At least some of the Mother's ideals, presented in the 1954 document titled, 'The Dream' need to be revisited, says Akash. For instance, the clause that "money would no longer be the sovereign lord" in a place like Auroville.

"It's certainly an ongoing challenge—and it has been from the very beginning," says Akash, about the balancing act between universal ideals and practical relevance. "Aurovilians are determined to create a new kind of economy, one that operates by different rules from the dominant model of the world," asserts Akash.

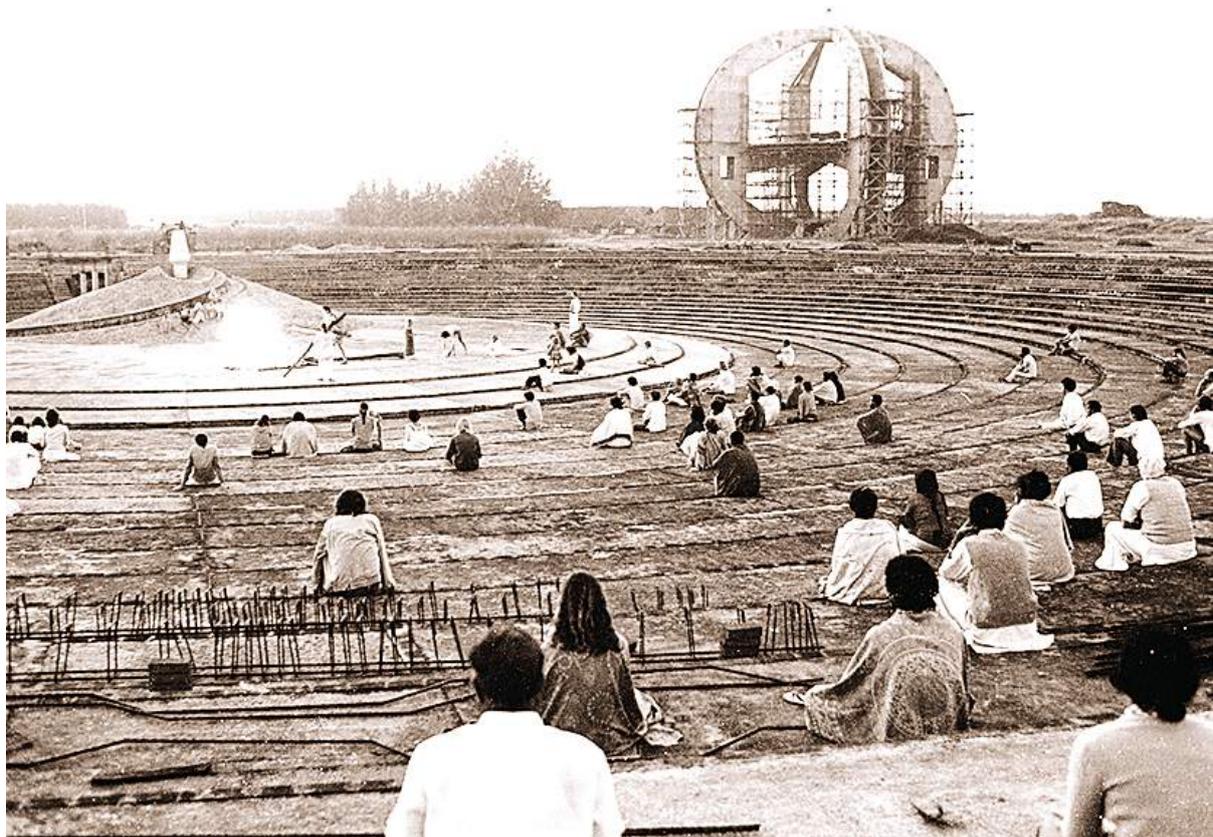
"This ambition is in many ways admirable. After all, the world is an unjust, brutal place, full of cruelty and unjust inequality. But the

fact is that the community does exist within the real world, and can't really escape the dominant economic model."

A lot of compromises and accommodation have been required for Auroville to survive, notes Akash. "The search for a new economic paradigm is still very much a work in progress, and in many ways a struggle," he says. "It would be a gross exaggeration to say that money is not a lord in Auroville. But, at least, the aspiration is there to find an alternative."

As the Mother herself urged, "Auroville does not mean coming to an easy life — it means coming to a gigantic effort for progress... All those who want an easy life and do what they please, say, 'Let's go to Auroville!' It should be just the opposite."

In his book, along with rare archival photographs, Akash recounts the community's origins, and the making of the Matrimandir, accompanied by many an amusing anecdote from the earliest days, such as of a family from Europe, who drove across West Asia, through Pakistan, only to arrive at a barren, empty tract of land. When they flag down locals and ask, "Where is the city", they're told by one person, "You are in the city." Another says, "There is no city." Yet another adds, "The city is everywhere."



A historical shot of Auroville, photo by Rakhal Venet

Paradise for creative work

Akash's research for his book began in the basement of the Auroville Archives, digging out the oldest known records about the community's history, including the poetry of Navoditte (Norman Thomas), and a collection of five stories by Vitthal (Anthony Mills).

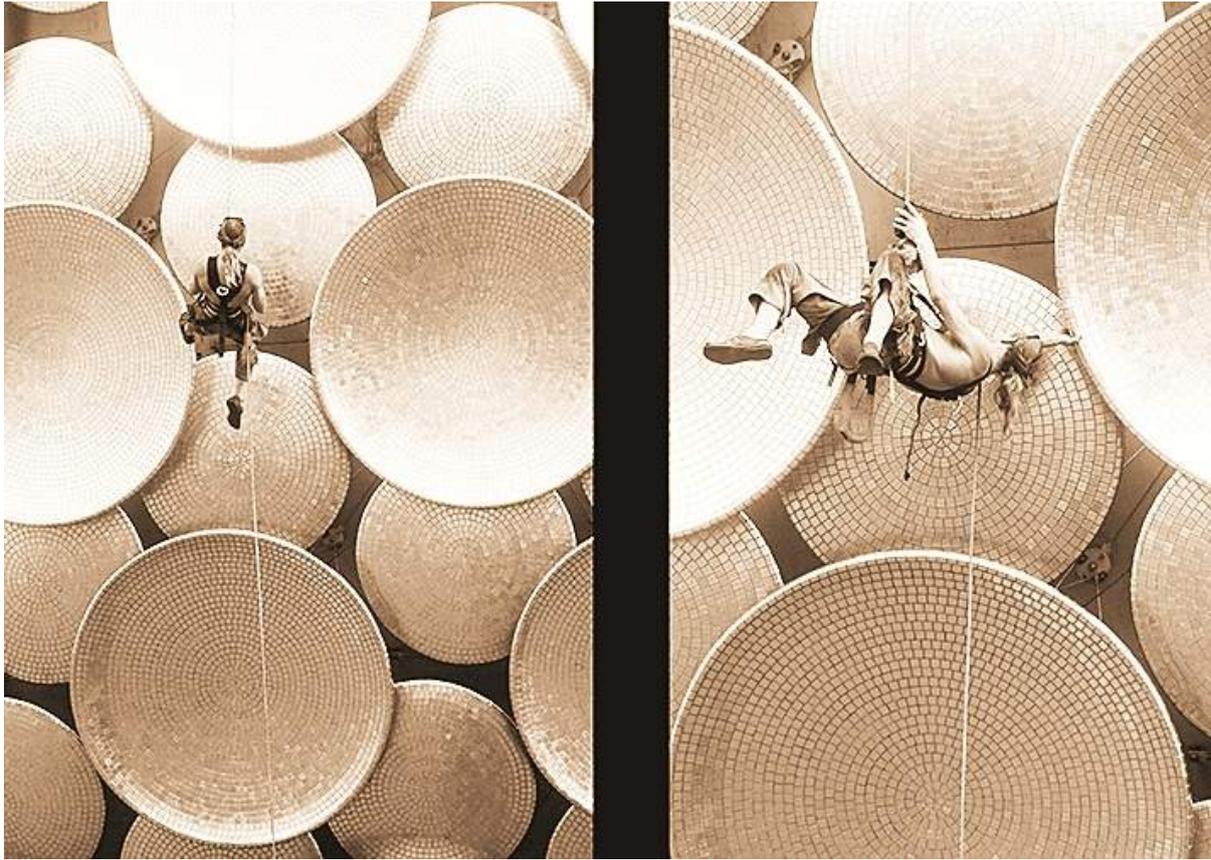
"Navoditte's writings were among the oldest," notes Akash, while Bob Lawlor's were probably the oldest texts he dug up. "Lawlor captures the earliest days of life in Auroville, when the land was harsh, and only beginning to be settled. Some of the photos capture those early days vividly. They give a sense of how much the physical landscape of Auroville has changed—from an open, barren desert to the lush forests of today."

Although Auroville has quite a long and varied history, much of that history hasn't been documented or made public, observes Akash. "The history of Auroville is, in a way, very private, and there isn't that much institutional memory," he says. "So, the challenge was to shed light on the hidden corners of the community—to find authors who represented those corners, yet whose voices and texts had sort of been lost or forgotten over time."

There are a few more laughs to be had in his book, in references about the township as an "intergalactic spaceship", and illustrations such as one of a man in a boxed cage on a beach, voicing the thought, "I feel safe and good".

"Auroville is a writers' paradise," reassures Akash. "The landscape is beautiful and lyrical, its population is diverse, quirky and possessed of real psychological depth. This accounts for its huge creative output—not just in literature, but also in music, visual and performing arts, and many other domains. I can't think of many other towns of less than 3,000 people that would have had an equally large and varied creative output."

In other words, Auroville continues to make dreamers, poets, writers and creative folk out of the people who pass through it.



A historical shot of work at Matrimandir, photo by Paulette Hadnagy

A city for human unity

"Today, there are people from around 50 countries living and working together, trying to build this new city in a collective manner," observes Akash. "In this way, and despite the usual conflicts, Auroville is a great experiment in cultural diversity and human unity."

As for misplaced associations with hipster groups, a few people initially, "perhaps a bit more conservative, weren't happy with the so-called hippie element", reflects Akash. "Personally, I think hippie culture also has a positive and interesting legacy. In Auroville's context, I would list the willingness to break with existing hierarchies, and the desire to re-imagine a more egalitarian world, as among its most important attributes."

The Mother's vision, of an evolved species of "supermen" or "overmen", meanwhile, will take some doing to achieve, admits Akash, as such ideals "need to be approached with a great degree of humility and realism".

To explain the concepts in simple terms, "The overman would be the next stage in an evolutionary process, a higher and more evolved being than the human species," says Akash. "It's an ideal

to work toward, but of course, we all remain very much human beings—with all the attendant frailties, vanities and limitations.”

For his part, Akash insists, his effort was “to stay away from grand, often platitudinous ideas and focus instead on the character and texture of everyday life in this community”. He adds, by way of extending an invitation, “Life is way more interesting than suggested by PR brochures. There’s so much fascinating, and admirable stuff going on.”

Before you delve in, however, you’d do well to attend a session of meditation in the Inner Chamber. Soon after, you get to sit under the century-old banyan tree outside, for a quiet moment of introspection. It’s a great way to begin your own Auroville story.



The historic inauguration in 1968, courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives

50th Anniversary Plan

- A SYMBOLIC CEREMONY will be held at the amphitheatre, Matrimandir. Feb 28.
- A CONFERENCE will be held at Bharat Nivas, themed, “The relevance of Auroville — India and the World.” Feb 24-25.
- A WEEK-LONG EVENT in which the youth will conduct performances and a conference on themes of Governance, Education, Growth, Economy, Land & Town Planning, Bioregion and Youth participation. Feb 23 to Mar 1.
- AUROVILLE FAIR will be held on the grounds of the International Zone, hosting stalls on organic farming, renewable energies, sustainable building, alternative housing, afforestation, eco-friendly lifestyle products, yoga and alternative healing remedies,

waste management, and up-cycling. Visitors will also get to participate in experiential trips to Auroville's forests and ecological research institutions. Feb 15 to Mar 1.

- **COMMEMORATIVE POSTAL STAMP & COIN:** The hosts propose the issue of a postal stamp & coin, bearing the galaxy concept of Auroville and/or a picture of Matrimandir. Feb 28.
- **PERMANENT PUBLIC ART INSTALLATIONS:** A series of sculptures will be installed across the landscape of Auroville. Ongoing.
- **WASTE MANAGEMENT:** In line with the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, various events for awareness, management and recycling will be held, culminating in a clean-up project of Auroville.
- **NEIGHBOURING VILLAGES:** To build relations between Auroville and its neighbouring villages, various programmes will be held to address issues such as alcoholism, caste differentiation, women's empowerment and child labour, apart from festivities and sports. Until Feb 2019.

Auroville's 50th anniversary will be held on February 28.

Auroville: Dream and Reality, Penguin Random House India, INR399

jaideep@newindianexpress.com
@senstays