'People think Auroville is an abstract philosophical project, when it is a very concrete, lived experience'

As the Puducherry township turns 50, author Akash Kapur talks about his relationship with the place and his new anthology, Auroville: Dream and Reality

Divia Thani

The Matrimandir at Auroville. Photo: Soltan Frédéric/Getty Images

You grew up in Auroville and left for many years before returning to raise your family there. Tell us about your relationship with it, and how it has changed over the years. I've always been quite a realist (some might say a cynic), but as I've spent more time here and interacted with a wider variety of people, I've developed a new appreciation for the idealism that underlies Auroville. I've written somewhere that one's assessment of utopian projects is basically a matter of whether you see the glass as half-full or half-empty. Much to my surprise, I've become more of a glass half-full kind of person!

How did the idea for this anthology come about?

I always knew there were a lot of good writers in Auroville, many of whom—for various reasons—weren't getting published or recognised by the official publishing machinery. I really felt these writers deserved more recognition, and that getting their work out there could help to deepen people's understanding of the complex, nuanced, often impenetrable reality of Auroville.

The author, Akash Kapur, finds that Auroville makes him more of a glass half-full kind of person

Being an insider can be an advantage and a disadvantage when putting together this sort of book. Tell us about your experience.
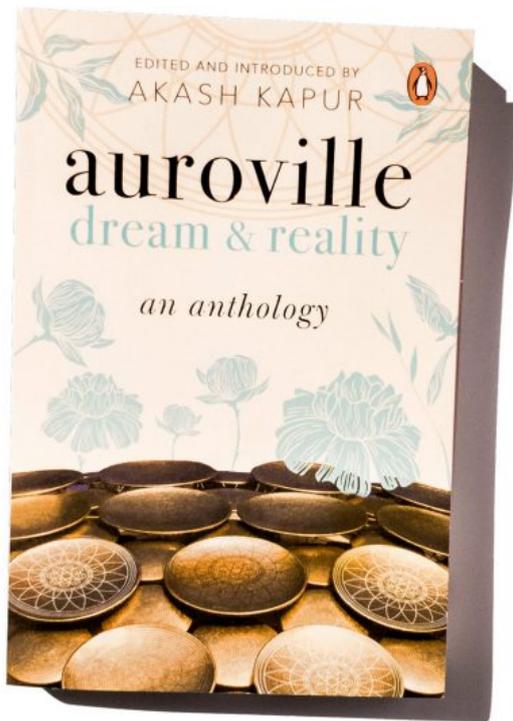
Being an insider meant better access—people were more helpful and I began with a certain knowledge of existing writing. The challenge, then, is to widen your perspective beyond what you think you know. I spent a lot of time in the Auroville Archives and other places, just reading—trying to discover authors and voices I wasn't familiar with. My goal was to capture the diversity of voices in this community.

What's the greatest misconception you encounter about Auroville?

The idea that it is some kind of abstract philosophical project, when in fact it's a very concrete, lived experience. People tend to read about Auroville's ideals and spiritual goals, and there is of course an aspect of life here that is touched by those. But there's also a very practical side of life here. Auroville isn't a monastery or ashram; people are building a new city—laying roads, digging trenches, planting trees, dealing with the often mundane tasks of everyday life. In many ways, I think this side of Auroville is the more interesting and impressive one. As Emile Cioran, the Romanian prophet of utopia (and dystopia) put it: "We are all geniuses when we dream." Reality is the ultimate test of a people or a project.

How relevant is Auroville in 2018? How relevant do you believe it will be in 2068?

I think it's very relevant, and in many ways, increasingly relevant. Arguably the greatest work Auroville has done is in the area of ecology; it's probably the most successful afforestation project in India. We all know the world is facing an environmental calamity, which looks like it's only going to deepen. Auroville has so much to share in this regard—both as inspiration, to see what's possible, how an eroded desert can be turned into lush forest; and more practically in terms of the specific lessons and methods it can impart.

Auroville: Dream and Reality (Penguin Random House India) is available in bookstores. Image: Athul Prasad