

AUROVILLE: A Vision Under Siege—Autonomy vs. Authoritarianism

By Viduthalai Ottrumai



environmental conservation; its practices and achievements in reforestation (over three million trees planted), sustainable building technologies, water catchment, organic farming, and renewable energy are globally recognized as models for sustainable development.

The Auroville Charter emphasizes the importance of unending education, spiritual research, and a collective effort towards human progress, ideals representing an aspiration for a world free from the divisions of nationality, race, and religion. In a world increasingly divided by these very issues, Auroville is home to around 3,500 people from over 60 nationalities, an example of unity in diversity, and offers living proof of our capacity for peaceful coexistence and productivity despite apparent differences.

In the global mosaic of intentional communities, Auroville stands out as a unique experiment. Sometimes called “the city the earth needs,” the international township in South India was founded in 1968 based on the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother (Mirra Alfassa).

Auroville’s principles are rooted in the practice of “integral yoga,” an approach to conscious living, and in the ideal of manifesting human unity. For almost six decades it has remained a place where people from around the world could live in harmony, focused on simultaneously developing inner practice and sustainable alternatives to the western consumerist juggernaut that seems to be accelerating toward multifaceted collapse. Recognized by UNESCO and the Government of India, since its beginnings the small community has been widely lauded as a pioneer in sustainable living and



Auroville is one of the longest-running intentional communities in the world, and by far the largest and most diverse.

Eroding the Dream

As is the case for many ideals across the planet, the dream of Auroville is under siege. Facing an accelerated takeover characterized by administrative overreach, political bullying, shady power plays, and money deals, this is not just a local issue but one with significant implications for all who aspire to a different way of living. The appointment in late 2021 of a new Governing Board and its Secretary, Dr. Jayanti Ravi, marked a significant shift towards centralized power. These are Government of India-appointed bodies who take part in Auroville's administrative management, until now consistently in collaboration with the residents of Auroville. The current unfolding imposition of authoritarian governance has severely impacted Auroville's autonomy, sustainability efforts, and social fabric, leading to widespread tension and instability within the community.

Much of this turmoil results directly from the systematic dismantling of Auroville's decentralized governance structures. Key internal working groups and committees responsible for critical areas, such as administration, public

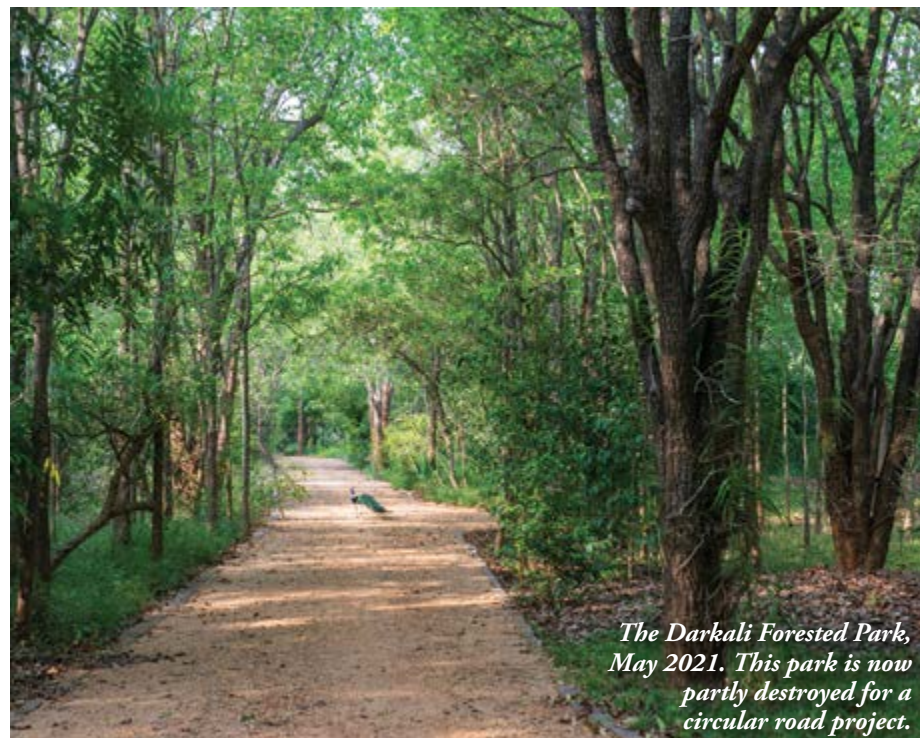
relations, media, town-planning, and finances, have been overrun and replaced. These bodies, previously steered by the residents, now operate under appointees with little loyalty to the community's traditional ethos. The new administration's top-down approach starkly contrasts with Auroville's foundational ideal of collaborative and democratic principles. Decisions impacting the community at large are frequently made unilaterally, often without transparency or consultation, fostering an atmosphere of coercion and fear.

Until recently, the Residents' Assembly has been central to Auroville's self-governance; majority vote determines and directs the township's daily life. It is a legally appointed model which has allowed Aurovillians to address communal needs and challenges collectively and organically, albeit slowly, and this ability to participate in key decisions has fostered a deep sense of ownership and responsibility. While clearly imperfect, experimental, and still evolving, this dynamic attempt at democratic process is now systematically ignored. Despite overwhelming opposition from the Aurovillian majority, the Governing Board's



Meeting of the Auroville Residents' Assembly to discuss one year of takeovers, 20th January 2023.

Photos by Dominique Darr



The Darkali Forested Park, May 2021. This park is now partly destroyed for a circular road project.

The current crisis in Auroville challenges its ideals of human unity, sustainable living, participatory governance, and the integration of spiritual and material progress.



Representatives of the Auroville community meditating around the Peace Table, July 2022.

Secretary claims “supreme authority,” using her post as a Government of India officer to nullify the Assembly’s decisions and stifle the community’s collective voice. This imposition of external governance structures threatens a long-term participatory model, underscoring the wider importance of safeguarding democratic processes and ensuring that community voices are heard and respected.

The erosion of governance extends to the marginalization of professional expertise within the community. Qualified individuals in critical fields such as sustainable architecture, water management, and ecological restoration have been dismissed and even denied visa renewal and expelled from India. Their replacements, often unqualified, are drawn from a small cadre politically aligned with the new Secretary, often leading to decisions that disregard Auroville’s long-term environmental and social sustainability. Residents face threats of eviction, housing loss, and discontinuation of critical financial allowances, and in several cases the nuisance of spurious court cases filed against them and IT scrutiny. Visa restrictions for foreign residents, some of whom have lived in Auroville for decades or were even born there, add to the instability, and have been weaponized against dissent. This atmosphere of intimidation has severely undermined the community spirit and the sense of safety that Auroville once embodied.

A Summary of Recent Events

Asset and Housing Control: Opaque “land exchanges” without accountability have resulted in real estate losses estimated at over 15 million US dollars to the community, raising unresolved concerns. The new Governing Board has taken control of Auroville’s physical development, funds, budgets, housing, and communal assets. A rewritten housing policy allows appointees to evict residents without due process, even when they financed and built their own homes.

Financial Mismanagement: The Auroville Foundation Office has mismanaged funds, cutting stipends and budgets for residents and their municipal services, leaving many Aurovillians without financial support. This has created significant hardships for those affected, considering that a majority of Aurovillians subsist on a minimal monthly stipend and reside in India under government auspices as “honorary voluntary workers.”

Silencing Resident Representatives: The Governing Board has created parallel groups to replace important majority-elected committees of the Residents’ Assembly, including the Working Committee. New regulations aim to give the Governing Board full authority over selecting the Working Committee, again effectively seeking to silence the Residents’ Assembly. These regulations have been stayed by the Madras High Court.

Environmental Destruction: The crisis has been marked by large-scale tree cutting and land clearing, the enforcement of an outdated development master plan leading to the violent bulldozing of forests and water catchment areas, as well as the destruction of residents’ homes. The clearing of protected forests continued in blatant disregard of a National Green Tribunal verdict that required proper environmental clearances for development. These actions starkly contrast Auroville’s ethos of ecological stewardship, reflecting an orientation shift towards growth-at-all-costs, high-density, concrete-centric development, undermining the township’s sustainable foundations.

Control over Admissions and Terminations: New regulations published in December 2023 allow a scrutinizing committee appointed by the Governing Board to control who can join or be expelled from Auroville, an extensive process previously handled by Residents’ Assembly-elected working groups. This has led to fears of losing Auroville’s sociocultural diversity and the free expression of diverse perspectives. These regulations appear to be against the Auroville Foundation Act and have been temporarily stayed by the Madras High Court in India. A final judgment is awaited.

Privatization and Outsourcing: Plans are underway to outsource Auroville’s health sector to private companies and institutions, and the road is being paved, literally, to transform it into a spiritual tourism site. Large events have been organized without community involvement, and misleading information is being distributed to visitors.

Media Outreach: Control over Auroville’s communication networks has tightened to a stranglehold, with the new administration seizing the main email server as well as online platforms such as the outreach media, all under the pretext of preventing anti-government activities. This has led to the deletion of comments and accounts, and the stifling of free expression. Loss of community control over the Auroville Archives raises fears of historical revisionism and a possibly warped makeover of Auroville’s history.

Reflecting a Broader Global Context

Auroville's struggle seems not an isolated incident but rather a reflection of broader global trends. The centralization of power, suppression of democratic process, and prioritization of commercial interests over sustainability as seen in Auroville are emblematic of issues faced by communities worldwide. As regards development vs. ecological preservation, the forced imposition of profit-oriented development practices in Auroville is yet another instance of environmental sustainability sacrificed for economic gain. Ongoing privatization of communal assets and financial misappropriation in Auroville reflect an unfortunate global trend towards increased concentration of wealth into the hands of a minority, broadly serving to exacerbate social inequalities and undermine communal welfare.

The current crisis in Auroville challenges its ideals of human unity, sustainable living, participatory governance, and the integration of spiritual and material progress. Despite almost 60 years of toil dedicated to building this "city the earth needs," the accelerated takeover of Auroville threatens to dismantle the very fabric of this unique experiment. If Auroville fails to maintain its integrity, it would demonstrate that such experiments in human unity are vulnerable to external and internal pressures, and raise questions about the feasibility of similar initiatives worldwide. In contrast, the lessons learned from Auroville's crisis could inform global efforts to create sustainable communities that are resilient against political and administrative disruptions.

Can collective action still counteract authoritarian tendencies, despite many instances of tightening global control by government and powerful economic entities? The battle for Auroville shows that communities can and should fight for their values and rights, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Despite exhausting challenges, community members continue to rally around their rights and ideals, seeking legal recourse and mobilizing support both locally and globally. Despite censorship and gaslighting narratives, the crisis continues to attract international attention and alliance, a show of solidarity underscoring our interconnectedness and collective responsibility to support communities striving for peace, sustainability, and unity.

The community's response to these challenges and its efforts to maintain the integrity of its founding vision are not only crucial for the survival of Auroville, but symbolic of humanity's resilience in the face of oppression. Auroville was always

envisioned as a microcosm of the whole, a living laboratory in which the universal struggles of humanity could be unraveled and worked through in a model setting; as such, this struggle can be seen as representative of broader, universal fights for local autonomy, environmental sustainability, and true community cohesiveness in the face of strangling dependency on centralized control. As we collectively grapple with senseless war, environmental crises, and governance challenges, the situation in Auroville reminds us of the critical importance of upholding and defending our highest ideals, and the need for a robust network of local and global support systems to sustain the people-driven communities dedicated to creating a better world.

For those interested in supporting Auroville or learning more, the "Voice of Auroville" journal provides detailed updates and perspectives from the community. You can access their publications and get involved through their website (auroville.media/voa). 🐦

Viduthalai Ottrumai writes under a pseudonym. COMMUNITIES invites responses to this piece by others involved in the unfolding events at Auroville, or in similar circumstances elsewhere.



Auroville residents organise a Peace Meditation under the Matrimandir Banyan Tree, 8th November 2022.

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