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Dr Jayanti Ravi, Secretary  
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December 5, 2021

Dear Dr Jayanti ji,

Ever since we met in Auroville in July, and following discussions and exchanges with several old Auroville friends, a few new ones, occasional reading of reports, articles in Auroville magazines and newsletters, etc., I have been meaning to write to you to share some thoughts on the lines of development of this unique experiment. I could not find the time to complete my attempt, but recent events encourage me now to do so. I should clarify that I write not as a member of the International Advisory Council (a recent and, for me, unexpected development), but in my personal capacity, as a former Aurovilian (from 1977, for five years) and constant well-wisher of Auroville, also as one of those who worked for years with Shri Kireet Joshi to free Auroville from the clutches of the Sri Aurobindo Society.

### **1. The question of the Master Plan**

Of late, I have often heard it said that the Galaxy plan is “Mother’s Plan”. Of course, Mother worked with Roger Anger and others on the plan, but I have never seen any indication anywhere that she regarded it as final and unalterable — indeed, such finality would have been wholly contrary to her constantly evolving vision. A dogmatic assertion of “Mother’s Plan” would also, in my view, contradict the spirit Mother wanted Auroville to embody: *“Auroville: ... At last a place where nothing will have the right to impose itself as the exclusive truth.”*

Similar assertions have been made that Roger considered the Galaxy plan as final. But if, abandoning our old habit of selective quotations, we care to listen to him (as in this revealing 1973 interview in French available [here](#)), we will find a very different picture (I translate a few excerpts):

“We could situate Auroville at the opposite end of the traditional approach of contemporary urbanism: in our urban conceptions, we conceive of a city on paper, however intelligent the conception may be, then we ask people to come and inhabit the city. Here, the approach is reversed: people live the experience, and from that experience, their living conditions and environment will be created and established.”

*(Roger is asked: “Then Auroville will never be completed?” He answers:)* “Perhaps not, but that doesn’t matter in the least. What matters is not to build a city, but to build new men. From that standpoint, what will be the time scale, how much time will it take? The future alone will perhaps let us know. I hope it will be soon, but ...”

I am not implying that we should not strive to create the city; but the *method* of building it is, to my understanding, of greater importance than the ultimate outcome. In Mother’s words again, “*It’s not when Auroville has been completed: it’s the nations’ collaboration in creating something [that matters] – but creating something founded on the Truth instead of a rivalry in Falsehood’s creation. [What matters] is not when Auroville is ready – when Auroville is ready, it will be one city among all other cities and it’s only its own capacity of truth that will have power, but that ... remains to be seen.*” (*Mother’s Agenda*, 21 September 1966) Only if our progress towards the building of a city is in the right spirit will the city be worth building – otherwise it will just be “one city among all others”.

I do not claim a full understanding of the intricacies of the work on a Master plan, but would like to draw your attention to three crucial facts:

- The Auroville “Universal Township Master Plan — Perspective 2025” submitted in 2001 to the Government by the Auroville Foundation, and later approved, clearly stated: “*2.1 1.1 Although the Master Plan (Perspective: 2025) indicates a time horizon of 25 years, it will neither be traditional, nor static and rigid.*” There was therefore nothing final about it; it was a well-researched broad framework, and no doubt a major step forward.
- As we know, the Master Plan still needs to be supplemented by a Detail Development Plan (DDP) with environmental, socio-economic and cultural policies and regulations. Several respected experts and groups within and outside Auroville have worked hard to prepare this DDP over the years, and have proposed solutions to adapt the Master Plan to ground realities. This will therefore require integration of the ground situation along with the projection of future scenarios (more on this below), and the involvement of the above-mentioned experienced Aurovilians.
- Instead of welcoming these initiatives, my understanding (confirmed by several recent statements by Aurovilians in such fields) is that a due process of dialogue, consultation and adaptation was discouraged and eventually scuttled, apparently under the belief that the original Galaxy plan must stand unaltered in every respect. Such a dogmatic line takes no account of the five decades that have elapsed since the Galaxy plan was formulated. I return to this below.

## 2. Has Auroville stagnated so far?

It has apparently become the official line of late that Auroville has stagnated for a long time and failed to show progress towards the realization of Mother's Dream. Permit me to contest this view, which overlooks the very considerable achievements of Auroville over decades in terms of water management, afforestation and eco-restoration (including erosion control), agriculture, alternative energy, alternative architecture and construction, handicrafts and cottage industries, rural development, health, education, and several more areas. Indeed, those achievements are what has made Auroville so highly respected in India and beyond.

That is also what the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi said in his speech at Auroville on 25 February 2018: *"The world has received positive vibrations from Auroville, in many forms, over the years. Be it unending education, environment regeneration, renewable energy, organic agriculture, appropriate building technologies, water management, or waste management, Auroville has been a pioneer."*

No doubt, many opportunities to do more, or better, or faster, have been missed owing to internal divisions, something most Aurovilians I know readily concede. But let us not measure "progress" by the numbers of buildings or inhabitants. True progress, in my view, can only be measured in terms of realization of "harmony", "concord", a "spirit of collaboration", and a "mastering of one's ego", as you yourself told us in our online IAC meeting of December 2, quoting from Mother. Once again, the building of the city should *follow* from such an attitude, not precede it.

## 3. The issue of sustainability

In the same IAC meeting, you conveyed to us that "Auroville needs sustainability at township scale (at present 3,200 acres of land with 3,500 people is not demonstrating sustainability). A self-supporting economy that will see to the care of residents. Development and maintenance of the town needs at least 30 to 40 thousand people to make it viable as stated by economist Henk Thomas in an interview with *Auroville Today*." A similar view is reflected in the Minutes of the Governing Board.

There is a very deep issue there: permit me to assert that today, in our increasingly uncertain, unstable and turbulent world, *nobody knows what is sustainable in the long term*. Sustainability studies, though already massive, are still in infancy. I could quote a number of economists and experts in sustainability studies (remember the Club of Rome, Ernst Schumacher, Edwin Goldsmith or David W. Orr, to quote only a few "prophets" from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and there have been many more in recent years) who assert that our current civilization and economics are fundamentally unsustainable and head towards irreversible (sudden or not) decline. That our policy makers are unwilling to listen to such enlightened minds, who are unwittingly in tune with Sri Aurobindo's vision at that level, is another matter.

As a further example, may I point out that the UN's Sustainable Development Goals set out for 2030 have recently be shown to be themselves unsustainable (see [here](#)). Therefore I would attach no importance to the analysis of a particular economist in the case of Auroville, clearly relying on a system which is now increasingly demonstrating its own unsustainability, but also its colossal ability to harm the planet, as Mother had many times warned.

The only certainty we may have in 2021 about “sustainability” is that systems, communities and larger societies that live *in collaboration* with, rather than against, Nature have a better chance of being sustainable.

#### **4. The need for an environmental audit**

This leads me to my next point: Afforestation and land reclamation apart, I am aware that many Aurovilians have worked hard on long-term issues such as water management, soil erosion, study of waterways, and on the dreaded prospect of intrusion of seawater into the aquifers. The current environmental crisis, which has seen (sustainable?) cities across the world flooded, engulfed in fires, pounded by cyclones, starved of water, etc., demands that we conduct a thorough environmental audit, projecting far worse climatic conditions than we have today.

To be complete, an environmental audit must not only deal with the above issues (if, for instance, seawater intrudes massively in 10 or 20 years, no city will be sustainable), but also integrate an assessment of the impact of urban development on the broader Auroville bioregion, a pollution impact, impact of any industrial development, and the social impact of the presence of thousands of construction workers for years together. All this needs to be assessed by independent, respected experts working in concert with Auroville's own experts.

I am not sure whether such a comprehensive audit has been envisaged or initiated. I do not consider that any Master Plan would be ready for implementation without it.

#### **5. Preserving Auroville's cultural heritage**

As you know, important archaeological remains going back to Megalithic and Neolithic periods have been unearthed in Auroville over the years, in collaboration with Archaeological Survey of India, and other archaeologists. Just the other day, Prof V. Selvakumar of Tamil University, Thanjavur, spoke on South Indian Neolithic at a webinar at IIT Gandhinagar (I will send you the link to his video shortly) and showed, among other sites, the remarkable finds at Auroville. It is important to ensure the preservation of this cultural heritage, with which local Tamilians will incidentally have an emotional bond.

UNESCO and ICOMOS charters indeed are eloquent on the governments' duties to preserve such cultural heritage, which can be guaranteed only with a proper cultural audit of the city plan's impact on it. Again, I do not know whether such an audit,

jointly conducted by experts from outside and inside Auroville, has been envisaged or initiated.

## 6. The events of December 4 & 5

Several more texts of Mother that you read out to us (IAC) when we met online on December 2, stressed the need for harmony and concord, for perfect disinterestedness, the first necessity of the inner discovery, of a fundamental spirit of collaboration, and much more. The use of coercion, the summoning of the police in Auroville, criminalizing Aurovilians, included youngsters born in Auroville, who had broken no law, wholly negates these high-flown ideals — ideals we *must* turn into practice if we are sincere in our desire to pay homage to Sri Aurobindo in this 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary year. Indeed, it was, to me personally, a moment of great sadness to witness this use of coercion on the very day of his Mahasamadhi.

You surely know that Mother declared she wanted “No police” in Auroville. She also said, “Auroville should not fall back into old errors which belong to a past that is trying to revive.” The use of coercion is part of those “old errors”. It also raises the question of what happens to Mother’s express wish for Auroville to be self-governing.

If I have once certainty, it is that we will never build a new world with the methods of the old. The way forward is known (it was called *purva paksha* in ancient India): a genuine process of consultation, dialogue, a sincere desire to understand the other’s viewpoint, all of it accompanied by transparency in the decision-making processes.

And so I end with this entreaty: let us work together and move forward together, not through dogmatism and coercion, but in this spirit of dialogue, flexibility, and acceptance of diversity of views. May I urge you to help nurture this spirit in Auroville, which you are competent and in the ideal position to do.

Respectfully,



Michel Danino

P.S. A last thought: if some issues appear intractable, why not form a sort of (informal) “Council of Sages”, composed of a few stalwarts who have sufficiently moved beyond their ego and individual preferences, and whom all parties would at least pledge to sincerely listen to. Mother did make such a suggestion at one point.