

Transcript of the address to the residents of Auroville by Shri R.N. Ravi, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation

Monday 7th November 2022, Unity Pavilion

Note: Small words ("of", "it", "them" etc.) have been added in places to restore flow to a sentence otherwise spoken as a train of thought, and for grammar.

My dear friends from Auroville,

At the very outset I express my sincere sense of gratitude to all of you for responding to our request for the meeting today afternoon. You know, when this Governing Board was constituted about a year back, we had come and met you. At the time we didn't have such a large presence. And so it is a matter of delight that we have a larger presence today.

Having expressed my gratitude and thanks to you for coming over, I would like to state the objective of this meeting, the purpose why we are meeting this afternoon. The Governing Board has requested this meeting and the meeting is being held. This is essentially - you all know it at some level, but I would like to express on behalf of the Governing Board, the Governing body - that we have some serious concerns about the affairs at Auroville, and we are here to share our concerns with you and then leave you with these thoughts.

And I'd certainly like to have the benefit of your suggestions, your views, because being Aurovilian, you are the one who's supposed to be or should be the one who may be the most interested and primary stakeholder in the development and management of Auroville.

When this new Governing Body was constituted, we got on the job earnestly to carry out the responsibilities entrusted to us. And of our responsibilities, one was of course, to promote the ideals of Auroville. We have to help the people, Aurovilians and others, on how to promote it.

But one tangible part of the responsibility was to implement the Master Plan as duly framed by the Governing Body in consultation with the Residents' Assembly and duly notified by the government in 2010 through Gazette notification.

This process, in fact, when it started, unfortunately, there were developments which were unpleasant in nature. There was boisterous opposition to it.

Now opposition was of the nature of 'this is not the way to do it', that the Master Plan is not finalised as yet, that it is not consistent with the ideals of Auroville because it is against the environment... on various lines, opposition was expressed.

Of course, the matter then started going to the media, national and international, the projection was made that Auroville was in distress, Auroville was under siege, Auroville was being destroyed by totalitarian control. The matter also went to court, to litigation.

In fact, the way the whole thing erupted, it gave us a shock. And especially to me as an individual, because I have been a student of Sri Aurobindo right from my college days. I have grown in my personal life following the two great icons, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo.

So, I was shocked, what could be there, then we started going into the background - why.

Now, we also started meeting Aurovilians. And in the last one year, several hundred Aurovilians have met me at least, individually and in groups of two, four, fourteen. They have shared their concerns - some saying that this is not the way to do it, this should not be done like this, some saying that, no, we must not delay it, we must do it. So both kinds of views and opinions have been coming.

Then we started wondering - Why is it so? This small family is hardly 3000 people with so many differences.

When the governing body in the late 90s and early years of the first decade of the present millennium, they drafted the Master Plan. And they drafted in consultation with the Residents' Assembly, because these are all matters of records. And it took almost 10 years or so.

When the government notified the Master Plan, for some reason, it took time and it was not implemented. When the new Governing Body came, we thought we should go ahead and do it. And then the opposition started coming: don't do it.

Some people for, some against.

Those who are against it say this is not the way, it should be tweaked, there should be some readjustment. There were ideas coming like that. Some people say that look, the fact that it has not happened shows that this is not the way, we must or will move forward.

A question haunted us as to why this small family is not able to collectively advise us on how to go about this.

Then we went into the background.

We all know that this unique experiment here began in the year 1968. And this experiment was essentially to translate the vision of Sri Aurobindo of creating a community of gnostic beings which Mother defined in terms of the Charter.

And it began.

In 1980, the government of India had to come up with the Emergency Provision Act 1980. And the very preamble of that Act says that the management of Auroville entered into such serious difficulties and differences that the government had to take over the management, and the government took over the management of Auroville.

At the time, for the next eight years till the Foundation Act came, the government managed Auroville with the advice of the International Advisory Council. There was no Residents' Assembly at the time, residents were associated but there was no formal body as Residents' Assembly. So, till 1998 [sic], affairs went on like that.

And then came the Act; the government thought the government should not be in it. So, they created a body corporate called Auroville Foundation. This Auroville Foundation created three bodies: International Advisory Council, Governing Board, and Residents' Assembly, to run the affairs of Auroville, to manage its affairs.

And we started the journey. And as a part of that journey, the physical manifestation of Auroville; Auroville has two parts: a spiritual evolution and physical manifestation; so to fulfil the physical manifestation of Auroville, the Master Plan was created. The Master Plan was drafted by the Governing Board in consultation with the Residents' Assembly, which finally the government of India approved and issued through Gazette Notification.

Now, when they started implementation, the problem again came. Questions were raised that it should be revisited. That is one part of it as far as the physical manifestation of Auroville is concerned, how the Master Plan has become a matter of debate.

There are differences, but when we started, I for one started looking into trying to understand, because as I told you, being a student of Sri Aurobindo, there was a deep anguish within me and I wanted to understand why is that? Where are we, how are things going on? We tried to understand and study Auroville, how it is functioning, how the individuals are functioning, how the institutions are functioning, how this collective is evolving.

In the process, I myself have gone through several areas, I have travelled to farms, I have travelled to the institutions where they are doing good things, manufacturing things. I have travelled to centres where they are producing things for the sake of Auroville.

A question that is lingering and very, very, very crucial: As far as the physical manifestation of Auroville is concerned, this is an area of concern in which there is a difference of opinion. But the core thing is the ideals of Auroville. We are not talking about the ideals of Auroville.

We know that we are all here as students of Sri Aurobindo. We have all been reading him and trying to understand and trying to evolve. The first thing that Mother's Charter makes very clear, that to be in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the divine consciousness.

And in plain and simple language, it means one has to be a bhakt, with total surrender to the Divine Consciousness, one must be a bhakta, a devotee, or a sadhak, who comes over here with a desire for further evolution to the higher level of consciousness. And that it's a place of constant education and progress.

Sri Aurobindo has also said - which we are all aware, and even Mother said, I myself have gone through the collective works of Sri Aurobindo, Life Divine and all. All of you, I'm sure many of you have gone through it, - that Auroville is different from other places because it is the place where collectively, through assisted evolution, one reaches the higher level. In normal course, it may take several lives to evolve. But by assisted living, Sri Aurobindo makes it clear it is possible it may be possible even to evolve in one lifetime. Sri Aurobindo lays down a process of integral yoga which is a combination of gyaana, bhakti and karma. It is not one.

First and foremost, a stipulation is through the Charter, that a person coming to Auroville has to be a bhakta, a devotee, a willing servitor of the divine consciousness and then integrate the two - karma and gyaana, knowledge - evolving it.

Now, it pains me, when I moved around, the sadhana element of it, we find it is GROSSLY deficient, grossly deficient. You may find my statement very provocative, but I want to provoke because after all, we are here not for the brand Auroville but for the soul of Auroville. If the soul is not there, brand does not matter.

People often say, we have built the Matrimandir - wonderful. But Matrimandir, which is the soul of Auroville, should be the place where Aurovilians should be regularly going and meditating. It has become a place of tourist attraction, tourists come and visit and go.

Sadhaks I have met individually, there are very good people who actually, when I met them, tears started flowing, they just didn't utter a word. I could feel a sense of pain and anguish among them - where are we? Where are we going? They were not even able to speak.

Someone very elderly said - Mr. Chairman, we have lost the way.

Now, the question is, when I look here, I find a lot of commercial activities going on. Somebody is doing good business.

Is it a place of commerce? No, certainly not. Because karma is nishkaama karma, where it is not self desire. I am doing the work but the work is not for my profit and benefit, it is for the benefit of the community's desire, that is nishkaama karma.

I find it very strange. And I find it very strange that in a small family of 3000, we are not able to produce enough food for ourselves. This is something which is intriguing.

I've seen people here doing distribution business. Things are being brought from different agencies in Calcutta, Bombay, and so many places, some are doing for distribution of things which are coming from Israel and some other foreign countries - we are doing trading, we are doing business, we are doing commerce. I'm not saying everyone - some of us are doing that. But is it consistent with the ideals of Auroville? I think we need to do some serious thinking on it.

As far as the physical manifestation of the Township is concerned - that is one part of it. But we are more concerned about the ideals of it.

Everybody comes and explains to me, 'we are for human unity.' And when I ask what is human unity, what do you understand? Someone says, well, we have got 500-600 people collectively, we have met and had lunch together.

Now human unity as we all know that Rishi Aurobindo said, is when I am standing here, a few 100 people are sitting here, and I see myself in each one of you as a divine manifestation of myself in all of you. When I'm able to see myself in all of you and you will start seeing yourself in me - that is unity.

Because we all know under what circumstances Rishi Aurobindo evolved this theory, his lifetime was a time when humanity was at its worst crisis.

The world has seen two devastating World Wars, the unleashing of atomic weapons, millions of people were killed. And the question that bothered him was - what is the fate of humanity? Is it self-destruction?

And then, through the long process of meditation and study, he realised that no, we are one step short of evolution, we have to evolve to that level where we all see the divine which is present in all of us in the form of consciousness.

The consciousness evolves by disciplining the physical part of the being, and then I start seeing myself in all of you, and then differences will dissolve, then humanity will be able to live in peace. And individually while some people were doing it for thousands of years in this country, he wanted as an experiment that let it be a collective exercise where the collective community of gnostic beings.

I've met, as I told you, several hundred people. And again, I'm surprised that many people I met are not even aware of all of us in this small village of a community. Everyone is living, by and large, I won't say everyone but by and large, people are living in silos.

That is a Governing Board concern, and it should be your concern as well, that Auroville is not like any other place where we are free to do whatever we wish, here the freedom is the freedom of a sadhak. The basic essential condition is that I am a sadhak. So, I have a right to be here, and I have the freedom to pursue it following the broad compass, the directions which are illustrated by Sri Aurobindo through triple transformation and Saptā Chatusthaya, how to do the sadhana.

How we are going to do this, how to do this, those things have to be evolved. We are doing some excellent work, I must say this, somewhere I've seen very good work being done. But these are good works in the material domain.

Where is that sadhana?

Who is coming?

You know, in 1988, when the Foundation came, even before in fact, in 1980 itself, the government was treating it, because Auroville is also the identity of India, because this is India's spiritual identity, which says *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the world is a family, and that is based on the fact that everyone is a manifestation of the same divine.

So for the growth of Auroville, the Government of India gave a number of special relaxations - like Visa. Anyone who seeks to come to India has to go through a scrutiny. Everyone doesn't get it; after all, with foreign countries, there is a security dimension. But the moment Auroville recommends, there is a trust that this recommendation is conveyed to our embassy and mission, and the visa is taken for granted.

Relaxation also is that a visa is for a longer term, for five years, normally we give it for a short term six months or a year to any tourist coming visiting, or one who is coming for some kind of well approved functions. We give it for longer periods.

Relaxation was also given to be exempted from taxation, the remittances which are coming up free, all these extraordinary relaxations, disregarding the security concern of the country because who all is coming is not vetted by the security agencies. It is trust.

These all were done primarily with a belief that Auroville must grow and must grow freely. According to the ideals of Sri Aurobindo, and as defined by Mother.

There may be a lot of problems, a lot of issues, we can keep discussing whether the road should be built here or not, we may be concerned about whether the crown is built or which building is built where, these are one aspect of it.

But the ideal of Auroville has to be preserved, it has to live here, and in the most vibrant manner. You know, all these publications that happened, the adverse publications that went to the international press, it did create a very, very bad name for Auroville. It was not in good taste.

But the question is, this is one part of it. The image of Auroville, the image of Auroville is important, but more important than that is the ideal of Auroville. The ideal of Auroville, if it suffers, the image is a fleeting thing. If our substance is good, the packaging will take its own course, we don't have to worry about it.

When Mother was here, there was no need for branding it. Everyone accepted it, and people believed it.

On behalf of the Governing Board, I would request all my dear friends, Aurovilians, to think of how to restore the ideal of Auroville. And I can tell you for sure, so far in this last one year meeting, visiting, I have seen activities which are just the opposite of the ideal. Some of the Aurovilians told me which I don't wish to repeat here... people were doing activities.

When I talk to the agencies, they say - Look, we don't usually interfere in Auroville because we believe that Auroville is a special place. However, we have got cases of substance

abuse, money laundering, embezzlement, fraud, land grab, I don't wish to go into detail of it. But these things don't edify us, these things don't bring us any closer to what we should be.

Neither I nor the Governing Board is here to give you a talk or lesson, no, you are all experienced. Some people say, 'I have been there for 40 years', some people say 'I have been here for 50 years'. Somebody says, 'I'm a third generation Aurovilian'. I wonder and we all wonder, is their being third generation something stipulated in the Charter? The Charter is whether we are committed to the ideals or not, that is important. Somebody says, I have met Mother - Yes, very good. You had that holy touch, you are blessed, but that should not be for you to tell me I have met Mother, so whatever I'm doing is perfect, because Mother has recorded it, Sri Aurobindo has recorded whatever he wanted, how he wanted the city to come. So it is not important.

How do you find stewardship being taken as ownership? Somebody who has been there at a particular place for, let us say, 40 years says 'it is mine'? Is it Auroville? Do we have that concept? I think there is a need for very serious churning. And it is something which is not beyond redemption, it can be done and it has to be done. And the Governing Board has a responsibility.

Now the question comes: who has got the power? Now these are immaterial matters whether the power is with the Governing Board power or with the Residents' Assembly power or with the International Advisory Council. These are immaterial. As far as we are concerned, there are only two powers - one is the Constitution of India and the laws of India, and second is the Charter given by the Mother.

There is no other power. We don't recognize any other power, Sri Aurobindo's teachings and Mother's Charter: that is one, sacrosanct. And the Constitution and the laws of India.

It is not important whether the Residents' Assembly has the power or the Governing Board has the power. We have come down to the level where we are doing it for the power struggle. I think we have moved far away from being a sadhak.

Now, we believe, and sincerely believe, that any way forward should be, as far as possible, in consultation and taking everyone along, aboard. We don't like to create any sense of discrimination, or any impression that force is being used - NO. Auroville is not the place where force and coercion should be the choice; that should not be the choice. But we also have an obligation, since the Act tells us to see that the ideals of Auroville are to be promoted.

Now when we see that the ideals of Auroville are being compromised, and compromised in a big manner, I have no hesitation to say, because I have not come here to play music to your ears, I have come to tell you what I feel as a pain, it is the anguish of someone who has been a devotee of Rishi Aurobindo. The issue has to be confronted frontally; it cannot be just wished away by nice talking.

If my words hurt you, you are free to hurl at me, I will not mind it; but the issue has to be confronted. And I would suggest now that Auroville has to have a set of guidelines, agreed norms how to conduct its affairs, in terms of who should be allowed to come, who should be in Auroville, what are some common minimum activities which are consistent or necessary for being a sadhak in this process of our forward journey. These norms should and MUST be there.

We have 50 years plus. We have made some significant achievements, there's no doubt about it, but these achievements in the physical domain are not everything. The core has to

be respected, the core has to be restored. So I would request every dear friend of mine present here, and those who could not make it due to some circumstances; let us not get passionate, let us not get angry at each other. Think over it.

Because I am telling it plainly: to let the status quo continue is not acceptable. Because India cannot afford for Auroville to decline, Auroville to move away from the ideal.

Auroville has to be spiritually strengthened, and of course materially reinforced as well, for which we need to have some set of norms...

I have always maintained that Auroville should be managed by Aurovilians; there should not be any external interference - this is the ideal situation. But when we see that the Auroville community, which is a small community, is not able to reach a consensus, and this is not the first time.

The Auroville Foundation Act's preamble states how the Emergency Provisions Act was brought in, because there were very serious internal difficulties in the management of Auroville and so the government had to step in. Now, we don't like the government to step in again. We would like Auroville to grow with the cooperation and goodwill of all the Aurovilians to make it what is its destiny.

But certainly Auroville is not a place for... Yes, some people said that we are helping the farmers. I asked how they are helping the farmers - they said they are helping them do productive farming. I asked, where did you learn farming? He was quiet. What is your expertise in farming? He says 10 years back, we were in Bangalore for 2 weeks learning something about farming.

First thing is, it is a 10 year old technique. Secondly, did you try it in Auroville? As a demonstration? We do not have any demonstration farm at Auroville for the farmers to come and see; so why should a farmer of the neighbouring village trust you? Simply for you to say that you are helping the farmers is not convincing. You don't have the requisite qualification to guide the farmers.

Somebody says yes, but for Auroville, I would have been lost. I come from a very poor background, my parents were very poor, and we have come. Very good - Auroville helped you and gave you a home and very, very noble land.

But tell me, how is it different from, in Tenkasi, there are people who from the last 45 years have committed themselves to rehabilitating the physically disabled, 24/7 they have been working, committing their own resources, and they have helped more than 40,000 disabled people. Their life is devoted to Seva.

How is it different from Villupuram in this very district, where there is a place where one young couple, for the last 12 years, have been helping the mentally disabled, intellectually deficient, autistic people. They also acquired a barren piece of land, and now they are growing into farming. They have rehabilitated more than 500 intellectually disabled people. They had invited me; I had to go over there and was so happy to see and touched by the sense of service, that as young persons after doing MBA and all that, they could have had a chance to go and do a good living. They chose to devote their lives to people who are marginalised and ignored by society: mentally disabled, autistic children. Both husband and wife. I was so touched when I found in front of me, one child of about 12 years, retching and the man went over and caught the vomit in his hand. That sense of service!

But that is not Auroville. Tenkasi, those who have helped more than 40000, is not Auroville. Auroville is for more than that, but here we don't see that.

I think there are people who are very, very anguished here. As I told you, when I met them, I saw their tears flowing. Their silence was so loud, so loud, they could not speak, but their silence... they were so anguished. I think we need to restore the ideal. We have to have some agreed norms for being in Auroville.

Following certain norms may not be strict, of course, nobody says it has to be a strict line that everyone has to follow, that independence has to be with every Aurovilian, but that freedom is that of the sadhak, not just of anybody else. We need to do that. As far as the physical manifestation of the Master Plan is concerned, the question is, when the Master Plan was prepared, in consultation with the Residents' Assembly, and it was in process for more than a decade and then it was notified, the question is: Do we revisit it?

There are people in Auroville who tell me not to go ahead. There are people who say this is not the way, we have to change it. The question is, do we keep revisiting a decision arrived through due process? I think if we continue doing that, there will not be any end to it. Here today, we have come, the GB has come to you, to clearly spell out the concern that we have, and to appeal to you and urge you all to be dispassionate and think it over.

Think over it - how do we develop Auroville? How do we keep the ideals of Auroville?

We - when I say 'I', I am talking on behalf of the GB, it's not individual - would be very happy to have your mails. As I told you, several hundreds of Aurovilians have come and met me. We are open to meeting you all. I am open, I hear. We are not short of time as far as listening is concerned, and come up with your ideas. But we also cannot keep waiting endlessly.

I would appeal to you all, if you have some suggestions, please send us a mail in the next one week. What do you wish. How should it be according to you, and what should be the agreed norms for the sadhaks, for the Aurovilians to follow.

And let us come away from these arguments which are essentially materialistic in nature. Those things are there, as far as the Master Plan is concerned, all those things there, those things are agreed, there will be problems, there can be litigation, we will try, wherever it is possible, wherever it is possible, to... You know, what is non-negotiable is the ideal. The ideal is non-negotiable.

And as for a decision taken through the due process, it should also be non-negotiable, but if there is a constructive suggestion, something that is in the interest and promoting the ideals, it is welcome.

It is not that we are pushing it.

But at the same time, I am telling you in very, very plain language, which may again hurt you: Auroville needs a shock, an external shock to bring it to its sense, bring it to its trail. Coming from a layperson, you might feel offended, but be that as it may. I myself have been a disciple, as I told you, I have been to many of the Auroville ashrams, Auroville places, I have been studying it. I do feel about it.

A status quo business as usual will not work. In the best possible manner, each one of us has to now jolt ourselves and think.

It is essentially for this purpose that I requested in you, I thank you all, the GB is grateful to you all and appreciate your coming and listening to our concern. Please send your mails, individually, collectively, the choice is yours, you are free; we will very patiently examine all

those. Let me assure you, we are all well-wishers of Auroville. We cannot afford, even in our remotest dream, to do anything that be contrary to the very idea of this country, to the darshan, the very vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

We are all humans, sometimes we may err. And that is where we leave to others, not only here, we even have a consultation with a lot of people who have devoted their lifetime in the sadhana of this integral yoga, and how to go through the triple transformation, and through forming the Sapta [Chatushtaya], the seven quadrats, how they have dedicated their lifetime. We have also been in consultation with them, getting their ideas.

But for heaven's sake, let us not have entitlement and rights, that "this is my right". This is not a place where we should claim rights and powers.

We are here collectively for a cause. And the cause is for each one of us, individually and collectively, to grow it.

Thank you, friends. Thank you very much for listening to me; I'll be very happy to receive your mails. Thank you.