

AUROVILLE PROJECT COORDINATION GROUP

Project Report Format

1. Name of the project: Cross-Cultural Restorative Dialogue

2. Name of the project holder(s):

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3. Amount received in rupees from SDZ: Rs.50,000

4. Year in which grant received: 2016

5. Amount(s) received from other donors:

Rs.22,800 from SAIER

Rs.21,000 anonymous donation from Bangalore

Rs.2,627 anonymous donation

(And a private donation given directly to Duke)

6. Please describe the activities of the project and the final outcome, or outcome so far if project has not been completed.

We wanted to host a larger community dialogue, one that might be potentially risky but that would hopefully bring us closer to living our Auroville ideal of “human unity.” We chose to focus on our cross-cultural relations, especially between Aurovilians originating from the locality and other Aurovilians originating from further away, as in our experience and understanding, this is where one of the largest cultural gaps exists, and therefore easily leads to misunderstanding and loss of trust in one another.

We invited Duke Duchscherer (from Canada/USA), who is an expert in Restorative Circles and who supports communities through long-standing conflict, to guide us with this project. His presence and involvement supported us to keep on walking forwards, as we might have otherwise not dared to take on such a topic. We contacted and invited many Aurovilians personally, and we also made a public call out to the community, inviting them to register for the 3-day Restorative Dialogue across cultures (which took place in mid-September). For the most part, the general community feedback and response was positive. Many people said they were so happy that this was happening and that it was long overdue. Others expressed how courageous they thought we were, walking into something quite unknown and certainly delicate. And interestingly, we also got feedback from some that there was no gap, and that we were looking to create trouble where none existed!

In total, we had 47 Aurovilian participants, plus Duke and our team of 5, and 3 people on the filming crew (adding up to 55 Aurovilians, and Duke). Of the 47 participants, 26 were Indian (15 of them Tamils originating from the locality), and 21 were of non-Indian origin. (The non-Indian participants were from so-called Western countries, as no one from other Asian or African countries signed up.) We later also organized 2 follow-up days (in early November and early

December, and with another one to come in January), and 22 of the above-mentioned participants attended.

Now, at the end of our 3-day Dialogue, and after the additional follow-up days, plus 3 smaller meetings with some of the Tamil members from the group (in October and November), it is quite clear to us that we do indeed have a cultural gap, and that it shows up in many aspects of Auroville life. It is not a comfortable exploration, neither as a personal inquiry nor as a group process, yet it has been (and continues to be) meaningful and introspective for many of us. We each experience this gap slightly differently, as it has several layers of subtle nuances. As a group, our focus was more on the dialogue and hearing each other than on coming up with a unanimous definition or explanation for why and how this gap came to be. And it is touching to see how the group is inspired to engage with it further, to explore the topic in more depth and to see if we might find ways of bridging this gap in Auroville, and to understand how much of it is work to be done on a personal level and how much requires a more systemic shift (in which case, we would need to define what that shift is).

We saw that much of the gap comes from misunderstanding “the other culture,” and making assumptions about why they do things the way they do, and generalizing their behaviour – thus creating unfavourable labels to describe or refer to “the other group,” and reinforcing a sense of “us versus them.” And yet, we saw that if we connect on an individual level, we are able to have understanding and care for each other’s perspectives and choices.

Although this is nothing new, we again saw how challenging it is to really listen, to really hear each other for what we are trying to express. We are generally so quick to respond, to agree or disagree, and to give our opinion. So some of our participants were quite frustrated in the beginning, finding the process a bit too structured and tedious. However, we believe that the slowing down and reflecting each other’s meaning and checking whether our understanding was accurate served its purpose – to deepen our understanding of each other, and to create connection.

A big learning for our team was how some of the Tamil community members interpreted the word “local.” As a team, we meant for it to be a geographical term, simply referring to those who were born in this locality. Yet, for some of the Tamil community, the word “local” came across as meaning “less valuable,” or “not as good as the ‘imported model.’” So when they read our invitation for this Dialogue, they felt hurt, thinking that we were saying the gap was one between “better Aurovilians” and “lesser Aurovilians,” and thus implying that “they” (the Tamils) needed to change in order to fit “our” (Western) standards.

It was interesting also to see that ultimately our differences (and behind that, our shared humanity) are not cultural – that is, that we have differences and challenges with human beings as individuals, independent of whether we have the same culture or not. So although superficially we may have cultural differences and therefore challenges, in reality, this is not the core of our problem, but only an excuse to not engage with a more open heart and open mind.

The following are some of the ways in which the gap showed up. These statements are clearly generalizations, assumptions, and even plain judgements, and yet the sentiment is a part of our community reality, and we imagine even perceived as true to some in the larger collective.

Some examples:

- **Auroville...**

- caters to Western values and does not welcome or adapt to Tamil values or customs, even though we are in Tamil Nadu
- **Westerners...**
 - are arrogant and patronizing, and treat Tamils (from the locality) as less worthy (and then are even unconscious about it!)
 - talk about “human unity,” yet subtly (and not so subtly!) imply that the Tamils need to adapt to the Western way of doing things
 - think that they understand Auroville’s ideals better than the Tamils do
 - show no respect or gratitude for being here (on this land), and simply act as if they are entitled to it
 - have a much more relaxed life, with more freedom, more financial security, better jobs, and so therefore can attend so many meetings and not do any “real” work
 - treat fellow Tamil Aurovilians in the workplace as employees, instead of including them as equals
- **Tamils (from the locality)...**
 - are more connected to their families and village ties than to Auroville
 - like to stay in their comfort zone and not explore what is out there
 - prefer to stay in the victim role (and envious), instead of finding ways to empower themselves
 - do not (care to) attend meetings and/or take part in Auroville’s development
 - do not really understand what Auroville is about
 - resort to violence and mobbing when they are angry, instead of dialoguing
 - threaten the Westerners with the idea of having their Indian visas revoked

It is quite clear that there is much work to be done to grow in our personal and collective awareness, and to drop our prejudices, heal our rifts, and see one another as human beings. And it goes without saying that the above statements do not ring true for everyone, and we have many real examples of Aurovilians and how they live and work in Auroville that clearly prove these statements wrong.

If we were to undo the group labels of “Tamil” and “Western” and create new ones (like the Germans or the French), we would likely have just as many judgments and assumptions. This pointing-the-finger and creating separation between “us and them” seems to be part of our present human conditioning, and not necessarily the truth. And it seems that this particular separation in Auroville is easy to jump to, because the polarization is more visible: colonialization, and all that comes along with that, is clearly part of our shared history. It is an uncomfortable topic, and one that we seem to not really know how to walk towards. So what we get is a mix of i) as Westerners, being oblivious to our role in this and/or exacerbating it, and ii) as Tamils (or Indians), the obvious resentment to being treated as less-than.

It was inspiring – as our Dialogue progressed, more and more of our participants committed to stop labelling others by their group identity, and instead to start engaging individual-to-individual, where a more genuine human connection can be felt more tangibly.

Despite our larger Restorative Circles and Restorative Justice project being about setting up an Auroville-appropriate justice system, on a practical level we are not really any closer to this reality. Yet, we are very much aware that building a justice system based on restorative principles requires trust and willingness to dialogue, and we sincerely believe that our exploration together has

contributed to an increased sense of trust and openness, at least within this group. And if nothing else, we have about 35 additional Aurovilians from different backgrounds who are now more aware of our Restorative Circles work and some of its basic principles (about 15 of the participants were already familiar with our work beforehand). And we imagine that the subtle nuances of our cultural gap will only add to the complexity of building this Auroville-based justice system, so we are grateful for any small steps we can make towards embracing one another.

We do not yet have a formalized Action Plan for the coming 1-5 years, although our Restorative Circles team is committed to continue deepening this exploration with our existing group, and to also offer future Restorative Dialogues for new batches of Aurovilians, either once or twice per year. The present group’s bonding and commitment to turning our experience into something positive for Auroville is tangible, and so we are hopeful of something concrete emerging, although it is still very much in the early stages. It is clear that we have a ways to go before we might see direct connections to justice and conflict resolution, although we intend to dialogue further with our group on this topic. Our team has developed a community-wide questionnaire about Justice in Auroville, and we hope to share this with our group soon (as well as the larger community).

We had also intended to create a documentary about this Dialogue, but we have unfortunately lost most of our data, due to our hard-disk crashing and the data not being retrievable. We are still committed to working with our audio files and photographs, although our end-product will likely be less engaging than we had originally planned.

Duke would also be open to come back to Auroville to continue supporting us with this and/or related projects, but at the moment we do not see how to make it financially viable. Although we are so grateful for all the financial support we received, in the long-run we need to be more realistic and creative in how to balance our own time and energy if we invest in such projects. And if we had the resources, financial and otherwise, we would love to engage further with the topic of our historical colonialization and its impact on our present Auroville reality. For this we imagine we would need the support of an external expert and facilitator.

7. Please provide a Financial Statement by filling in the table below. Rows may be added or deleted.

DONATIONS RECEIVED

PCG - SDZ	₹ 50,000.00
SAIIER*	₹ 22,800.00
Anonymous	₹ 21,000.00
Anonymous	₹ 2,627.00
<i>(plus a private donation given directly to Duke)</i>	

Total Received	₹ 96,427.00
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EXPENSES

Hall and Tea/Cookies	Unity Pavilion	₹ 8,218.00	
	Tibetan Pavilion	₹ 4,500.00	
	cookies	₹ 1,438.50	₹ 14,156.50
Printing and graphics	Flex poster	₹ 11,250.00	
	12 Qualities	₹ 3,696.00	
	News & Notes pages	₹ 600.00	
	prints	₹ 915.00	₹ 16,461.00
Translation Work (graphics into Tamil)		₹ 1,100.00	₹ 1,100.00
VC lunch for participants		₹ 15,900.00	₹ 15,900.00
Auroville Radio audio recorder rental		₹ 700.00	₹ 700.00
Kolam design (3 days at venue)		₹ 1,000.00	₹ 1,000.00
Honorarium for Duke	from SAIER	₹ 15,000.00	
	from SDZ	₹ 10,000.00	₹ 25,000.00
Guest House for Duke		₹ 5,000.00	₹ 5,000.00
Taxis for Duke	Thiru pick-up	₹ 2,000.00	
	airport drop	₹ 2,200.00	₹ 4,200.00
Taxis within AV	to MM	₹ 200.00	
	to Mango Hill	₹ 300.00	
	to Unity Pav	₹ 200.00	
	printing pick-up	₹ 300.00	₹ 1,000.00
Taxis to Pondy	for printing	₹ 612.00	
	for Duke	₹ 600.00	₹ 1,212.00
Food / Restaurants	Tanto	₹ 2,400.00	
	La Terrace	₹ 450.00	
	Dreamers' Café	₹ 250.00	
	Mango Hill	₹ 5,500.00	

Villa Shanti

₹ 1,861.00

₹ 10,461.00

Total Spent

₹ 96,190.50

BALANCE AMOUNT

₹ 236.50

*Please note that SAIER's donation was given for specific costs:

- Honorarium for Duke: Rs.15,000
- Chennai airport pick and drop for Duke: Rs.4,800
- Food for Duke: Rs.3000