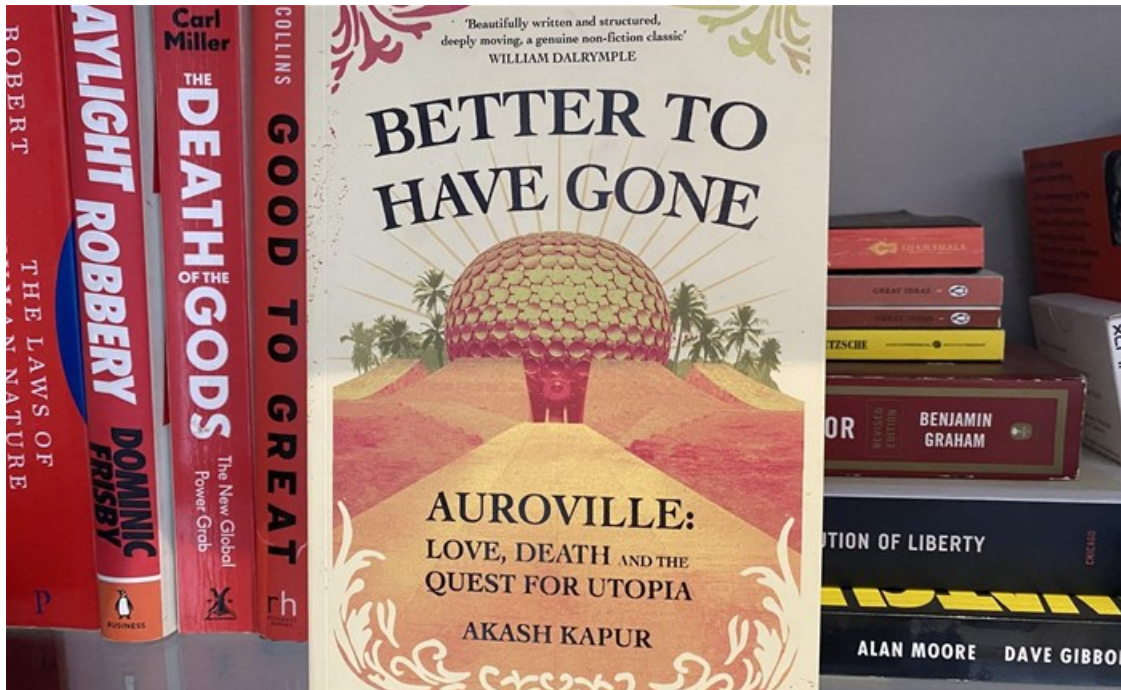


In search of utopia

By [Bronwyn Williams](#)

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The problem is that utopia is so often shot through with the worst forms of callousness and cruelty. Human beings - individuals, families - are mere sideshows in the quest for the perfect world, they are sacrificed at the altar of ideals. Robespierre said that you had to break some eggs to make an omelet. Mao warned that a revolution was not a dinner party. Maybe I'm too soft, but I feel I've seen these maxims in action. I've lived them, and I could never subscribe to them. - Akash Kapur



Auroville: Love, Death, and the Quest for Utopia is a biographical history of one of the longest-surviving utopian projects that arose from the clash of western decadence and eastern spirituality in the late 1960's. *Auroville* follows the story of a pair of doomed lovers, John, a rich American man, and Diane, a poor Belgian woman, who travelled to India to find themselves (and each other) and become founding members of a utopian model village. The author, Akash Kapur was one of the first generation of children to grow up in Auroville and is married to Diane's surviving daughter. The resulting book is an up-close view of a family tragedy set against the backdrop of the greater human tragedy : the pursuit of a mirage of perfection.

Sad ironies abound.

For example, the residents of Auroville attempt to reject capitalism and create a money-free society. To do this they run away from their western homes in all corners of the rich world, and set up camp in a foreign nation. In order to create their utopia, they have to displace the local Indian communities and purchase their land. They also need to eat. To feed, clothe and house, themselves and their families, they rely on donations from wealthy (mostly foreign) western capitalists. Internally, the contradictions are no less uncomfortable. When the community sets up a bakery, they prohibit the purchase of bread - all food is supposed to be freely given to those who want it, no exchange of anything as crass as money is permitted! However, *supplies* come from outside of utopia and must be purchased. In order to keep the illusion of communalism, the bakers and residents engage in a strange dance : the residents sneak outside of utopia to purchase supplies of grains from the open market and then "donate" the grain to the bakers, who then 'give' the bread to the individuals who purchased the supplies. Of course, squabbles result as grain-buyers feel short-changed by the bakers and then non (financially) contributing members of the community.

The bigger fights are also financial and relate to in-group arguments over whether residents or trustees should control the financial interests and accounts of the community. This dispute eventually escalates to the point of the various factions threatening the lives, limbs, and livelihoods of their opponents. What really stands out though, is how the residents who refuse to take a side in this battle, the 'Neutrals' received the most hate and violence from their peers.

This, of course, is a bit close for comfort, in a day and age where it feels like everyone wants you to '*choose a side*', '*pick a team*', '*if you're not with us you're against us*', '*if you're not anti-x, you're pro-x*' and other false dichotomies. The story of *Auroville* reminds us not just how petty those cheap ultimatums are, but also how dangerous they are to harmony, progress, and productivity.

The persecution of 'Neutrals', like all attempts to remove the centre, reduce the chances for reconciliation and sanity to prevail.

Brands and businesses should be particularly careful about using enemy-making as a strategy. As Rory Sutherland has explained, using your advertising budget to insult your competitor's clients might make you (and your employees) feel good, but it's not going to tempt *any* of your competitor's clients over to try your product instead. Threats and insults are not very persuasive.

Furthermore, even if insults, threats and violence *could* persuade through coercion or shame, bad means are never justified by the ends they attempt to achieve.

Human lives are not eggs to be broken for omelettes. And, while violence and coercion may be *sufficient* means to get to a particular 'utopian' end - they are not *necessary* and they are not nice. Any 'utopia' that requires stepping over human beings and treating lives as disposable to get to, is not worth arriving at.

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