

## **Statement on the inaccuracies contained in the BBC video on Auroville**

### **General comment**

The film contains allegations without any of them being substantiated, or having been properly researched into. This video is nothing but sensationalism and tarnishes the reputation of Auroville and that of the Auroville residents.

The BBC has refused the request of the Working Committee to postpone the showing of the film and instead take up a more thorough - and more objective - investigation, which could ensure that neither the reputation of the BBC nor that of Auroville would be carelessly put at stake. The BBC has been invited to come to Auroville and make such an investigation, and the Working Committee had offered to fully cooperate to ensure that they have access to all possible sources of information. This invitation has not been taken up.

### **Detailed comments**

#### **1) No opportunity given to Auroville to present its views**

The journalist has not asked any Aurovilian in position of authority such as members of the Working Committee or the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation for a response to the allegations while she was in Auroville. This is a dereliction of journalistic duty. Only after strong protests from both the Working Committee and Auroville International UK did the BBC agree to include a short interview with a member of the Working Committee. This interview was tagged on to the video and aired after it, and is therefore far less persuasive than if it would have been included within the film itself. The video is biased and gives undue prominence to one view and has not given sufficient time and space to the Auroville authorities to state their views.

#### **2) Only one Aurovilian has been cited**

The video has portrayed only one Aurovilian (!) whose statement moreover has been taken out of context and so has become inconsequential. While several other residents had been interviewed on film regarding their work and activities, no other Aurovilians have been shown in the video.

#### **3) No check on credibility of interviewees**

The journalist has not checked the motives and credibility of the interviewees. Some of them have since been identified as persons who have been asked to leave Auroville in the past for reasons of misbehaviour and therefore may bear a grudge.

- a) Interviewee Mr. Raj Batra, is a person who was never an Aurovilian nor accepted as Newcomer. Mr. Batra was a guest and was in 2004 asked to leave Auroville on account of making various misrepresentations to Auroville authorities – about his nationality (he said he was Indian while he holds a British passport); about his education (he claimed to be an English educated lawyer which he was not); and

on account of complaints by residents of the Sri Ma community in Auroville about his anti-social and destructive behaviour during his stay in that community. Auroville subsequently informed the Regional Registration Officer, Pondicherry, about Mr. Batra. It is obvious that a person whose guest facilities have been cancelled and who has been asked to leave, has a grudge against Auroville.

- b) The person identified in the video as ‘Sundrun’ has been identified as someone who has been working at the Matrimandir and was asked to leave as he was found out in illegal activities.

#### **4) No verification of truth of allegations**

The journalist has not verified the truth of the allegations made by any of the interviewees.

#### **5) No correction of mistakes and innuendos pointed out by the Working Committee**

- a) The introduction of the video is full of innuendo and contains many mistakes. “Auroville is a small town in South India with big ideas. Established in 1968 as a Utopian city where people of all nations could live together in harmony, with no money, no rules and no leaders it is pushing for city-state status much like the Vatican\*. At present less than 2,000 people live there – most of whom are white westerners, but it is hoping to grow to a city of 50,000. But many of the locals say they are being exploited by the people that live there. They say their children are being sexually abused by people in Auroville and they are too frightened to do anything about it because they are totally dependent on Auroville for work. Rachel Wright reports.”

The journalist has not corrected this statement notwithstanding the request by the Working Committee. The statement contains the following inaccuracies:

- i) The concept of Auroville is based on high ideals, specified by The Mother. They are not ‘big ideas’ of Aurovilians.
- ii) Auroville has not been established as an utopian city but as an Universal township endorsed by UNESCO.
- iii) At no point in time has Auroville ever pushed for a city status like the Vatican. This statement is not only untrue but malicious as it could be interpreted as sedition by the Indian authorities.
- iv) Auroville has at present 1747 inhabitants, of which 749 (approx. 43%) are Indians and 998 (57%) non-Indians. The statement that most of the inhabitants are westerners may be literally true but clearly implies that Indians are insignificant which is untrue and is an innuendo to indicate an overpowering influence of Westerners.
- v) The statement “But many of the locals say they are being ruthlessly exploited by the people that live there” is false and full of innuendo. Auroville is surrounded by eight villages with a total population of approximately 20,000 and is in close proximity to the city of Pondicherry. Auroville is heavily dependent on the goodwill of its neighbouring villages for its growth and development. In turn, we employ about 4000 people directly in Auroville. The salaries and other employment benefits Auroville pays are equal or better to those offered in Pondicherry for comparable work. There is no question of any ruthless

exploitation; on the contrary, Auroville is a good neighbour and the lifestyle of many villagers has drastically improved due to the existence of Auroville. Apart from Auroville, many villagers also find employment elsewhere. Auroville's is well-known for its social work which benefits many villages.

- vi) The statement "They say their children are being sexually abused by people in Auroville" is incorrect. Auroville has set up seven schools for village children in and around Auroville. Also government schools exist in these villages, and the city of Pondicherry which has many schools is only 8 kilometers away. In case a villager would fear for sexual abuse of their children in any Auroville school, he could easily remove the child to another school.
- b) The statement "The tourists see Auro beach as a tropical paradise ....The residents live in a utopian community built around a giant gold sphere, they follow the vision of someone they call the mother, and induction takes one year...But the locals live in poverty and say their children are the victims of sexual crimes. Welcome to Auroville" is incorrect. The journalist has not corrected this statement notwithstanding the request by the Working Committee. The statement contains the following inaccuracies:
  - i) There is no such thing as an Auroville beach. The beach in front of the Repos settlement is a public beach and is publicly accessible. Access to the beach through Repos is only possible for Aurovilians and guests.
  - ii) The central theme of Auroville is spirituality. The Matrimandir testifies to that, a building which is visited by tens of thousands of people each month. To call it 'a giant gold sphere' is an attempt to create the impression that Auroville is a sect. This attempt is being strengthened by the words 'they follow the vision of someone called the mother and induction takes one year.'
  - iii) The residents do not 'follow someone called The Mother'. There is complete freedom in each person's spiritual search, though many are studying the works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The teachings of these visionaries are not considered a religion, as was upheld by the Supreme Court of India. The lack of any reference to what they stand for is a major omission in the film.
  - iv) There is no 'induction'. There is a Newcomer probationary period of one year, during which a newcomer is supposed to get to know the community and find a place of work, and see if this is indeed the place where s/he wants to settle. The journalist was fully aware of this as she has been sent a copy of the current Auroville Admission Policy.
- c) The journalist's statement "Auroville was founded in 1968 by a Frenchwoman, Mirra Alfaasa. She became known as 'the mother'. She believed the community could realise a more advanced human consciousness," shows the complete lack of research done for this film. The journalist has not corrected this statement as requested by the Working Committee into "The Mother conceived of Auroville as a place for realizing a progressive human unity, a site for material and spiritual research for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity."
- d) The journalist's statement: "Aurovillians believe in something called divine anarchy - no rules, no leaders - and that this will bring about harmony" is misleading and has not been corrected as requested by the Working Committee as below:

- i) The term ‘Divine Anarchy’ was once used by The Mother in a joking way, while describing the ideal management structure for Auroville. There is no aspiration for ‘no rules, no leaders’.
  - ii) There *are* rules, such as the Admission Policy which was sent to the journalist.
  - iii) There is a management structure. The legal structure is laid down in the Auroville Foundation Act, set up to promote the manifestation of Auroville. It has created an Auroville Foundation, headed by a Governing Board, assisted by an International Advisory Council and there is the Residents’ Assembly comprising of all residents. The Working Committee of the Residents’ Assembly of the Auroville Foundation sees to the contacts with the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation and the Government of India. The work itself is being done by many working groups, each with its own responsibility and executives as laid down in community-approved mandates.
- e) The journalist’s statement “The 2000 westerners and middle-class Indians who are Auroville’s members receive grants from the Indian government, income from tourists, donations from abroad, and operate successful enterprises and pay no tax” is misleading and has not been corrected as requested by the Working Committee as below:
- i) Only a minority of Indians come from the middle class, while the majority comes from the local villages in Auroville’s bio-region.
  - ii) The journalist confuses the Auroville Foundation with individual Aurovilians. The Auroville Foundation receives donations from within India and abroad, as well has income from its commercial activities. The Foundation is exempted from paying Income Tax under section 10.23.c.iv of the Indian Income Tax act. Individual Aurovilians are taxable in accordance with Indian tax laws.
- f) The journalist’s statement “16,000 Tamil villagers live in Auroville too. Few of them become members and most live on around £30 a month. That material difference has caused ongoing tension between Aurovillians and the local Tamil villagers. Aurovillians say it leads to resentment and unfounded accusations. The local Tamils say it makes them vulnerable – especially their children who attend schools run by Auroville” is incorrect and contains the following mistakes, which have not been corrected as was requested by the Working Committee.
- i) Quite a few people from the surrounding villages aspire to become Aurovilians attracted by its ideals. More than a third of Auroville’s population has its origins in the villages around Auroville and more have applied to become member. Auroville does not encroach on any village; rather, Auroville, in fact, is an excellent neighbour.
  - ii) As in any other place in the world where a new society tries to take roots, differences of life styles create tensions. There is a natural resentment to the internationalism of Auroville, the distrust of the foreign element, and the difference in income levels. These are natural processes of co-habitation, which are being addressed when problems occur.
- g) The journalist has not corrected the statement that “Some children here are currently being abused – particularly in the New Creation school – men come in and ask them to stay after school and then have sex with them... giving food and

paying them – the children get used to this life – to the money and they’re going back for more.” As has been pointed out by the Working Committee, this statement is patently untrue and is made without any proof being offered. The original version of this statement carried the sentence “I think one in five children here are currently being abused”. This sentence was removed by the journalist in the final version of the video after the Working Committee had pointed out that it is unimaginable that a parent would send their child to a school in the knowledge that one in five children would be subject to abuse. But the journalist has not removed the other extreme claims nor has she questioned the truth of them. The fact is that men are not allowed to enter a school campus to engage in this behaviour and the management of the New Creation School does not tolerate such behavior. The fact that Ms. Wright hasn’t questioned and interviewed the school management about this statement is another indication of untruthful and malicious reporting.

- h) The journalist has not corrected the statement that “But witnesses say he [Keim] continued to work with children in Auroville for another 5 years.” She has not identified these witnesses and verified the truth of their statement. The truth is that after Keim’s newcomer period was terminated in September 1996 he went to live elsewhere India, and that the Indian authorities only took action in 2002 which resulted in his conviction for paedophilia in 2004.

#### **6) Unsubstantiated and unproven statements**

The journalist makes herself unsubstantiated and unproven statements. A case in point is the scene at the beach, where she says that she has seen “in the course of 2 hours last week 3 different men with different Indian boys and one of them took the boy to as hut over there”. She does not verify that 1) the men were Aurovilians or Auroville guests or others persons as the beaches in India are publicly accessible; 2) the nature of the relationship between the men and the boys; 3) what happens in the hut.

#### **7) Unproven internal website quotation**

The journalist states that one disgruntled Aurovilian gave her access to the internal website of Auroville. Why the Aurovilian is disgruntled she does not mention. She then shows a text, which she says comes from Auroville’s internal website, stating that it refers to worries about abuse at the New Creation School. Originally the postings could not be identified, but it emerged that one of the statements shown in the broadcast was from an entry of 2003, concerning the follow-up after the Didier Keim story came to light. It voiced an expression of deep concern with the possibility of sexual abuse. The other one is a fragment of a security report of 2008, and relates to a person who was neither a guest nor Aurovilian and who was mentally instable and roamed around Auroville – there is no question of paedophilia there.

#### **8) Unproven allegation that people are afraid to talk**

The journalist states that people are afraid to talk and she quotes an interviewee stating that “if these kind of stories come out, there would be death threats from Aurovilians and we have no protection from them.” The journalist has not verified the

truth, which is that at no point in time in Auroville's 40-years of existence has any villager ever been seriously aggressed by an Aurovilian, leave alone been issued a death threat.

**9) Unidentified witness**

The video carries a shot from a certain Ram who, it is said, is representing a local charity 'which reacts to the problem'. "This man teaches local children how to deal with unwanted advances from predatory adults. He has seen the nature of Auroville's members change over the years." The journalist has neither revealed the name of the person nor the name of the charity and the statement is pure innuendo as if all the predatory adults originate from Auroville.

The Working Committee  
30-05-2008

*\* The observation that Auroville is "pushing for city-state status much like the Vatican" was one of the few errors taken out by the editors when requested by the Working Committee.*