

This talk tells the story of the genesis of a very important event for Auroville as this Act, voted by the Indian Parliament in 1988, gave a legal status to Auroville. It is still the basis of Auroville's administration. Till now, there was no full documentation on the long period of gestation of this Act and particularly about the dramatic culmination during the three weeks of August-September 1988. This translation of the French transcript has been augmented with a few more details about the events which led to the break-up with the Sri Aurobindo Society.

Genesis of the Auroville Foundation Act

Claude Jouen: One day Alain was talking to me about the law of the Auroville Foundation. I asked him how it had happened and why it had happened: he told me a lot of things and I asked him where I could find this information. The answer: Nowhere! So I asked Alain to give a talk on the subject for the Pavillon de France, which would then be recorded by the Auroville radio, transcribed and given to the Auroville archives. This is how this lecture came about.

Alain Bernard: The good thing about the amiable pressure from Claude to give a talk is that it did bring me to do some research on the topic. I asked Krishna Tiwari and Frederick – as we were together in Delhi during the time of the Foundation bill vote – I suggested that we should get together and try to remember what happened. Actually, at that time, we made a big error: when we came back from Delhi in September 1988, we should have got together and written immediately the detailed history of what had happened. But we did not do it.

When we met – I had prepared a small note with the broad parameters of what I remembered – both told me, “Whatever you’ve written on this note rings true, but unfortunately, we cannot really say, we don’t remember much about it anymore.”

So, I told myself, I should be able to find in Auroville some documents about what happened. At first I went to the Archives, but found nothing. So I followed up by going to *Auroville Today* – which also started in 1988... in November 1988. Surely the Auroville Foundation Act was an important event for *Auroville Today*, there must be something. So I went to the *Auroville Today* archives and effectively, I was very happy to find an article but, alas! there is hardly anything in it! And that is because, when we gave the interview, we constantly said that “Actually, this we’re not supposed to talk about, and this, and this as well” because at that time, when the law came through, certain things had happened about which we could not talk about openly. So the result is that in this article, there is nothing specific to be found, only generalities. So, at some point I started to wonder, “Have I dreamt all these things I think I remember?”

I called a retired high functionary, a close collaborator of Kireet who had helped a lot at the time – I thought that he at least would remember – I gave him a call and he said, “You know, Alain, I really don’t remember much of what happened at that time! The only thing that I remember is that it was a miracle!” Then I called Kireet. I always felt that Kireet had a very precise memory. And once more, my memory and Kireet’s did not fully coincide.

I then went back at the Archives and looked at the *Auroville Notes* which came out between September and October 1988 and I saw that there was a mention of a meeting of Aurovilians with Frederick and Krishna on the 9th of September 1988, i.e. just after their return from Delhi and it was mentioned that this meeting was recorded. So I spoke to Ayappan (who works in the Archives) and told him that there must be a recording of this meeting of September 9th. He said that they had no such recording, but he remembered that he had seen a cassette tape on which it was written that Krishna, Frederick and Alain had given an interview. And finally I discovered a tape there that was effectively the recording

of the interview given by the three of us to *Auroville Today* in September 1988, about one week after the voting of the Auroville bill. There I found all the details omitted in the article and so I was finally reassured that I had not dreamed the whole drama. I quickly copied the content of this precious tape on my computer, so now it is safe. Therefore, it was a useful research and frankly, I don't know if I would have gone through all the trouble to do this research if there had not been that pressure from Claude to give this talk, so thank you Claude for that.

There is a second point which I would like to clarify: I am not trying to defend here what has happened afterwards, what the Auroville Foundation law has become in its implementation. It is what it is. It's true that some people think it is unsatisfactory. The Auroville story may have been very different if this law had not come through. So, what I am going to do is to try and tell the story of its birth. To try and show how actually these things happened. But before doing that, since quite a few people here were not there at that time and the years before, I'll have to explain how we got to the point where we had to have a law for Auroville. To understand that, we have to look back, briefly, on the first 20 years of Auroville.

I also would like to mention that, when I did this plunge in time which took me all these years back, while looking at these twenty years, I see a personality that strongly comes out, and this is Kireet Joshi. Kireet Joshi, for those who don't know about him, was for many years the director of the Ashram school under Mother's direct guidance. Mother once had suggested to Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, that it would be good if Kireet would work for her in the future. Some months after Mother's passing, Indira Gandhi did invite Kireet to come and join the ministry of Education. And in fact, unofficially, he rapidly became quite close to the PM. When the problems in Auroville came in the open, after 8 Aurovilians were sent to jail in 1976 due to the strong pressure brought on the local police by the Sri Aurobindo

Society (SAS), Kireet intervened with other people who were very close to her. Afterwards he remained more or less in charge of the Auroville file in the Government nearly until 1988. When I look at the amount of work he did for Auroville I must say that it has been an extraordinary work. Particularly from 1976 to 1988, Kireet has been quite an extraordinary worker for Auroville. And he did it in addition to his other onerous responsibilities as one of the few top functionaries in the Central Government.

Another thing I would like to say is that the story I am going to tell is a story full of emotions; it has been often quite painful for a number of people. The history of Auroville has yet to be written. There has been a project to write the history of Auroville, but it still has to be written down. Only pieces here and there have been written. So today I am presenting one of these important pieces that may have been largely forgotten if I hadn't had the opportunity to do this research and elaborate it. It is a story that at moments was very difficult (but also had its beautiful moments) and was perceived in different ways. Unfortunately Auroville came out of it divided. So I would like to tell you that while I am giving this talk today, it is with the full awareness that I cannot be but subjective. I am going to present this story in my way. I can only say that I shall try to be as honest as possible.

Glimpses of the early organization of Auroville

The Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), an organisation closely linked to the Ashram, had proposed to the Mother, when the idea of Auroville began to take shape in the early sixties, to take care of Her project. She accepted the offer and therefore the Society provided in the earliest stages a first stable framework, both legally and economically, through which basic administrative tasks could be handled.

This administration was in Pondicherry and, soon enough, the

communication became rather difficult with the few Aurovilians who were trying to settle on the Auroville site. That the relationship between the early Aurovilians, particularly those coming from abroad, and the office holders of Auroville official administration in Pondicherry should have been uneasy is not so surprising. Most of the Auroville administrators in Pondicherry were Ashramites, not so young or even elderly, used to a certain way of functioning in the context of the Ashram and generally expecting to be treated with a modicum of respect in view of their seniority. Many of the young foreigners who had come were rather brash and hardy, impregnated with the liberal culture of many western countries where youth were actually in reaction against the establishment.

There was also a deep contrast between the projections and plans made for Auroville in various offices in Pondicherry, which were rather on the grand scale, and the stark reality of the day-to-day life of the pioneers on the Auroville site, who were battling for survival on a land devoid of trees, severely eroded, where all too often procuring enough water for daily needs and watering the plantations — and protecting the same against herds of cows and goats — was a daily struggle.

After various organizational experiments, including a one year long experience with a Comité d'Administration d'Auroville (CAA), Mother was clearly dissatisfied and decided in February 1971 to give the responsibility of the day-to-day administration of Auroville to Shyamsunder, making him her Secretary for Auroville, working under her close guidance.

When Shyamsunder took over the direct administration of Auroville, he established what became known as the Beach Office in a large room on the ground floor of one big SAS building on the Pondicherry seaside. Soon enough the residents of Auroville, most of whom quickly came to respect and have confidence in Mother's chosen intermediary, took the habit to come to this office to submit their projects and problems to him. Shyamsunder

in turn would see the Mother quite every day and take Her guidance whenever necessary. It gave him a special place and role in the complex hierarchy of Auroville's early management, which included the Chief Architect, Roger Anger, Navajata, who was the SAS General Secretary and main fund raiser for Auroville, plus a number of associates of these main actors. One common characteristic was that none of them was residing in Auroville, which contributed to a developing sense of estrangement from the side of the residents.

Mostly due to The Mother's presence and to some extent due to the role played by Shyamsunder, the frustrations of an increasing population of residents were kept in check despite the accumulating difficulties. But after May 20, 1973, the Mother was no longer available for guidance and advice, a fact which did contribute to the residents of Auroville growing feeling that they should develop their own organization.

Mother's departure in November 1973 was a big shock for the early residents who felt deeply the loss of Her physical presence. During the following months, concerns and doubts about the methods of the Sri Aurobindo Society would steadily grow.

The registration of the Auroville Society and its aftermath

On November 4th 1975, seven Aurovilians registered an *Auroville Society* in an attempt to create an independent legal body for Auroville, which could receive funds independently and offer the opportunity to develop a new internal organization for Auroville. This was done out of sheer frustration of seeing no improvement in the way Auroville was administered by the SAS, particularly by its chairman. For instance, despite promises that two Aurovilians would be co-opted as members of the SAS Executive Committee, it was not implemented, reflecting probably the deep-seated aversion of Navajata to share power at any level. At the

same time the economic situation was deteriorating, making the life of residents quite precarious. Development projects were suffering and, in addition, all too often funds raised by the residents themselves for various projects but by necessity channeled through SAS accounts would have to suffer a 50% cut to honor an agreement made by the SAS with the State Bank of India that half of all funds raised for Auroville would go to reimburse the large debt incurred since the beginning of Auroville. So frustration was growing deep which led some Aurovilians to decide to act.

This action of registering a Society would be the first salvo in what would be a long legal battle for the independence of Auroville. The initiative taken by the seven Aurovilians — which came out of the blue as very few were taken into confidence because of the fear that the SAS would have immediately taken legal steps to block the move if it would have heard about it beforehand. This created a big turmoil in Auroville. On the 5th of November, the announcement was made about the registration of an Auroville Society and it was proposed to hold a general meeting under the Banyan tree at the centre of Auroville on November 9th so that the rationale behind the action could be explained to all Aurovilians and decisions taken about the follow-up.

The reaction of the authorities in Pondicherry was one of shock and disbelief. Messages were sent immediately not only by the SAS but also by the Ashram authorities — who would unfortunately take mostly the side of the SAS in the conflict with the Aurovilians — that the new Society should be dissolved forthwith.

Community meetings will continue to be held every week, sometimes twice, till the end of the year during which reports were given about contacts between various Aurovilian representatives and SAS and Ashram authorities.

During the numerous meetings held in Auroville, there were discussions about questions of organization with the idea that many administrative functions based in Pondicherry should be

taken up by Aurovilians. After a while, some fatigue set in and meetings became less attended. Nevertheless, two important steps were taken. One was the creation of a new medium of communication, a weekly journal, *Auroville Notes*, to link and inform the communities. The second was the establishment of a new economic and financial system linking several activities such as Pour Tous store, bakery, laundry, green fund, etc. through a Pour Tous Fund in which there would be collective as well as individual accounts.

The flurry of meetings between groups and individuals from Auroville and the SAS and Ashram authorities did not bring tangible results. Therefore, on 2nd December 1975, the SAS filed an affidavit in the Pondicherry Court to obtain an injunction against the *Auroville Society*. In this document, the SAS made the following claims among others:

In the legal sense, it (Auroville) is a project which is part and parcel of the SAS and takes within it all the land, property, buildings, equipment which are now situated in the complex known as Auroville. (p. 1, para 2)

The Charter of Auroville is a spiritual declaration. It is inappropriate to quote from the Charter in a legal document. All the land, equipment, etc., in Auroville are the properties of the SAS and no person can set any title to the properties or claim the right to manage the same. (p.2, para 4)

The defendants have no right, much less a statutory right, to carry on any activities in Auroville or in respect of Auroville, except to carry on the work allotted to them by the plaintiff Society. (p.3, para 7)

Auroville is the property of SAS and is under the management of the Executive Committee of the SAS. The loose expression "Aurovilians" has no place in legal documents. (p. 5, p 10)

So it was in the open now, how the SAS dignitaries saw the

Aurovilians, not like brothers who had come from all over the world to respond to the call of the Mother and her Charter for Auroville, but like employees at their beck and command. Even if one takes into account the fact that legal affidavits do not so easily allow the making of subtle distinctions, the wording and tone of the document was felt deeply offensive and confirmed the long-held suspicions about the real attitude of the SAS office-holders behind the early vague conciliatory promises.

While the Court case was going on in the Pondicherry Court, the SAS was taking other ominous steps, such as asking foreign Aurovilians, requesting the visa guarantee that SAS only could give, to make a statement of support and obedience, short of which no guarantee would be extended. On December 30, the SAS registered a new trust called Auro-Trust, under which all the properties of Auroville were listed, including units created by Aurovilians, so that they could claim all the income deriving from Auroville activities. They were trying to force the Aurovilians into submission through court case and other legal means.

Attempts at conciliation and final break

Yet for some time in the beginning of 1976, maybe prompted by the managing Trustee of the Ashram, Counouma, who was quite worried about the developing conflict and the bad publicity that it was likely to create, there was some effort towards conciliation. The Pour Tous Fund managers were allowed to open a bank account in the local Auroville branch of the State Bank of India — which could not be done without an authorizing resolution from the SAS (who still rejected two names in the proposed list of signatories). Navajata promised regular support to the Pour Tous fund for the maintenances¹ of Aurovilians — a promise which

1 Maintenance : monthly allocation for basic needs.

would not be honored. Navajata and other members of the SAS Executive Committee came to two successive meetings of the recently organized weekly Pour Tous meetings. Navajata even went to the extent of soliciting a hut in Aspiration — by far the largest community at the time — so that he may have a chance to better understand the day-to-day realities of the Aurovilian life. Despite the overcrowding, as it was thought a manifestation of good will, a recently vacated large hut was made available. And he did come and spent a few days...

But through the large cycle of action-reaction, and with the kind of events which tend to occur in a conflict situation, the chances of conciliation are always fragile. After having initially agreed to channel funds for Aurovilian maintenances through the new Pour Tous Fund, Navajata apparently changed his mind and no funds were received, despite several reminders. In early February, there came the shocking news of Francis, an American Aurovilian, getting a Quit Notice. Then, soon after, Savitra, another American, got the same. When questioned about it, Navajata pretended that it was Government of India's decision due to allegations of CIA connections. Nobody was fooled by this tale and, immediately, a petition was opened to support our American brothers, which further infuriated Navajata, upset that many Aurovilians were signing it.

On Auroville land also, things were becoming difficult. The manager of Land Estate for the SAS pretended to administer those agricultural lands on which Aurovilians had settled and had begun the hard work to bring the land back to health. He was leasing Auroville lands with cashew or mango trees which were under the care of Aurovilians to local villagers, thus deliberately creating a tense situation. The SAS also began to hire local villagers as watchmen whom they did not hesitate later to set against Aurovilians whom they considered "trespassers".

When it became clear that Navajata and the SAS were trying to get Aurovilians into submission by withholding financial support,

the small group managing the new Pour Tous Fund experiment decided in late February to inform the community as well as all the friends of Auroville abroad, Auroville Centers as well as individuals. There was a nice response both from the Aurovilians — quite a few came and made donations, sometimes quite substantial — and from the Centers. The result was that Auroville began to be financially independent from the SAS, something that we did not think really possible at the time, but were forced to accomplish under SAS blackmail. This hard-won financial independence — of course yet very fragile and minimal — would later be very crucial by enabling the community to ask for the support of the Government of India in its struggle for autonomy. Such a request would have been difficult to make if the community were still economically dependent on SAS resources. So, retrospectively, one can now say that it was an unintended major gift from Navajata and, surely, a big strategic mistake of his in the unfolding conflict.

On the visa front, problems were growing. The SAS did not renew their guarantee for those foreigners they considered undesirable, therefore putting about thirty of them on the wrong side of the law. In addition, for extending visa guarantees, they decided to ask even long-time Aurovilians to sign an amended admission form in which the signatory specifically declares that he or she “will also abide by all administrative and other decisions of the Executive Committee of the SAS whether made so far or in the future.” Francis and Savitra had finally been obliged to leave India at the end of March, despite repeated efforts in New Delhi to solve the problem created by the SAS. Needless to say that the atmosphere in Auroville was very disturbed and most Aurovilians were quite upset with the SAS and worried about the future.

The fight breaks out: the police in Aspiration, and Aurovilians in jail

The hut obligingly given to Navajata stood empty for weeks — only once in a while would his nephew, Prabhat Poddar, come and take a nap! It felt like a joke and a provocation in an overcrowded community as Aspiration was at the time. So one day in early May, there was a meeting of a large group of Aspiration residents which decided to take back the hut and allot it to a family in need of more space. The hut was opened and the very few belongings found there were carefully set aside to be given back. The next day early morning, there was the shock of police presence in Aspiration as a complaint had been lodged by the SAS. The police stayed on day and night, which gave a strange feeling to the residents, to say the least. After three weeks, on May 29th 1976 — the day when a long concreting joined the four ribs of Matrimandir — eight Aurovilians were arrested, six French, one American, one Indian, as the supposed ring leaders of the rebellion. They spent one full week in the Tindivanam sub-jail till they were freed on bail by decision of the High Court of Madras.

The overreaction of the SAS had the unintended result of attracting even more the attention of the Central Government in Delhi, which was already alerted to the conflict situation through the story of the eviction of Francis and Savitra. Hardly three days after the arrest, a high official was sent to Pondicherry and Auroville to assess the situation and report. This official was none other than Kireet Joshi, a former close collaborator of the Mother whom PM Indira Gandhi had called to Delhi. During the twelve years that it will yet take to complete the liberation of Auroville, Kireet Joshi would remain a very central actor. Now there would be no turning back from the conflict which will have to be played out till the bitter end.

After the visit of Kireet Joshi, there was an expectation that the intervention of the central government would somehow free

Auroville soon. But government wheels move slowly and there were complexities in the situation. The SAS had legal rights which could not be ignored even if the international nature of the project and the existence of several resolutions from UNESCO gave a certain legitimacy to a Government supervision.

Auroville's population would remain more or less stagnant for many years due to the very uncertain and unsettled situation. For many people outside who were aware of Auroville's predicament, there were legitimate doubts about Auroville's ultimate survival. But most if not all residents felt confident in Mother's protection. They were intimately convinced that Auroville would prevail against all odds.

During these months of summer and fall of 1976 the weekly Pour Tous meeting remained the main forum in which collective matters were reported, discussed and decided. They were held in a small building built at the border of Kuilapalayam as its first destination in 1974 was to be a shop also open to villagers. Later it became the Pour Tous centre for food distribution to Aurovilians and then the Pour Tous fund "bank". Sometimes up to 60 people would squeeze themselves inside amidst the vegetable and other food items, some on the ground, some up on the counter. It is only towards the end of the year that it was decided to shift to a more convenient space. After several trials, the Pour Tous meetings finally settled for several years in the large living room of a big house in Auroson's home community (today Certitude).

A first Government move and sudden setback

Towards the end of 1976, the Government made its move. The setting of a high-level committee for Auroville was announced and it did come into existence by January 1977.

But it so happened that in March 1977 Indira Gandhi lost the general election that she had called after the lifting of the State

of Emergency¹. The opposition, for once united, won and a new Janata government came into power. This was felt as a huge setback by many Aurovilians who feared that the government protection recently obtained may not endure. There was a feeling of uncertainty.

A few months later, early September, five Aurovilians managed to see the new Prime Minister in Delhi. Toine (one of the five) told me the following:

The meeting was not at the house of the Prime Minister but in his office in South Block. We entered the office by saying that we were going to meet the Personal Secretary of the PM and when we met the Personal Secretary and told him that we came to meet the PM he was angry and made us wait ... long hours.

Another member of the delegation, Prem Malik, long ago gave me an account of the meeting:

Although we had no appointment, we went to the PM office to try and see him. We were told that we had little chance to be able to see the PM but we were allowed to wait. We waited nearly for 5 hours. In the meanwhile we saw Shyam-sunder, who had got an appointment, coming out and he told us that the old man was in a bad mood.

Finally we were called and when we entered, Morarji Desai was reclining back on his seat, looking very much the 82 years old that he was and I had a rather sinking feeling, as an Indian, seeing this new PM looking so old and tired. We took our seats and Savitra began to talk, with the PM remaining in the same apparently lethargic position. At one

1 State of Emergency proclaimed by the President of India in June 1975 upon request by PM Indira Gandhi whose continuation in office due to legal problems was challenged through large manifestations in the whole country.

point, Savitra said something like : “We have come to India to help,” and suddenly Morarji quite literally jumped up in his seat and said forcefully “India does not need any help!” I felt happy that there was actually quite some juice in the old man while we all looked rather severely at Savitra.

This was not a very auspicious beginning but, after a while, we managed to tell our story. He then told us that he did not much believe in the chances of our project as our leader was dead. But he said something like “India is a vast country and if 400 odd people from many countries have assembled to pursue some spiritual goal, it can be accommodated and such people should not be harassed.”

He asked whether this Navajata, about whom we were complaining, was not in fact Keshav Poddar. I was able to confirm this. He then said that he knew this man to be a crook. As Chief minister of Bombay, he had wanted to arrest him but Navajata had fled to Pondicherry and “Your Mother protected him,” he added.

He did not see what he could do for us but he said that he would make a noting that important Auroville matters should be referred back to him prior to any decision. I believe that it contributed to providing a modicum of protection to Auroville during the turbulent times that followed.

After this rather miraculous story – I don’t know if there are many countries where you could meet the Prime Minister without an appointment – there was a kind of ‘rampant guerilla war’ with many struggles. But Navajata was never able to do what he wanted, that is to say (he himself told me once in 1976) “close Auroville and reopen a few years later”.

What happened in 1977, 1978 and 1979, was quite difficult. We had little money, resources were scarce. At that time some Auroville farms were growing “clusterbeans” a kind of hardy bean (surely not to compare with those from Gerard in Auro-orchard),

the kind you need to chew well! And we were flooded with “clusterbeans”. One day, someone from Aspiration suddenly entered Pour Tous where my partner Christine was trying her best to find money for the food market and told her: “Clusterbeans, clusterbeans, but we are not animals!”

That is to say that those times were really challenging, but we did survive as best as we could. There were several protracted battles with the SAS and its representatives. They managed to get the police to arrest a large group of Aurovilians (about forty) towards the end of August 1977. The Aurovilians had assembled under the banyan tree; the policemen surrounded them and called out the names of those to be arrested. The Aurovilians stayed in jail for a few days and, later, had to appear every fortnight before the court in Villipuram. Whenever and wherever possible, during these long years, the SAS resorted to harassment, particularly trying to block the work at the Matrimandir. Nevertheless, the Aurovilians were able to make slow progress in various areas, including in their organization which continued to be centered around the Pour Tous meetings as the main place for collective decisions. Towards the end of 1978, the Auroville Cooperative came into existence: a small group of 8 or 9 Aurovilians for a better coordination as well as to represent Auroville whenever needed.

The government gets involved again

Then rather surprisingly, Indira Gandhi came back to power – after the Emergency and her defeat in 1977 we did not have much hope she could possibly return to power. Her party won the elections early January 1980 after the collapse of the Janata government. She soon called an advisor who was very close to her. His name was Sir C.P.N. Singh¹. He was someone who had already

1 A diplomat, eminent administrator and friend of Nehru.

helped Auroville a lot and she asked him to be the governor of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of India. C.P.N. Singh, who was already quite old (he was about 80) told her [something like this], “You know, politics for me... I have had my share; at present that is not what preoccupies me, I prefer spiritual life and I am preoccupied about the situation in Auroville.”

Indira Gandhi told him: “Please do what I am asking you. I need you in Uttar Pradesh [the most politically difficult state] – I promise we will do something for Auroville.”

So that was one of the reasons we came to know why Indira Gandhi got quickly involved with Auroville. But she herself had shown personal interest for Auroville and she had a sincere devotion for the Mother. Therefore she was motivated to act for rescuing the project. As a result, at the end of the year 1980, around November 12, in newspapers headlines Auroville was big news: the Government had promulgated an Ordinance for a temporary takeover of Auroville.

Why an Ordinance? There was a secret story behind this ordinance. It had been promulgated just before the opening of the parliamentary session. Normally, the government does not do that. An ordinance is passed when the Parliament will not be in session for some months or at least several weeks. But here the winter session was going to start very soon. But the Government knew that there was a lot of support for the SAS in the Parliament because Navajata had many friends and a considerable amount of contacts everywhere. There was a perception that if the government tried to pass a law on Auroville in the Parliament, it would be quite difficult, there would likely be lots of amendments proposed by SAS supporters and the desired result would not be obtained. Therefore, it was decided to go for an ordinance because when an ordinance is promulgated, the Parliament – which must ratify an ordinance within six months – cannot amend it; it can reject it, of course, but otherwise it must ratify it as it is.

By December 9, the ordinance was replaced by the Auroville

Emergency Provisions Act, which was passed after few days of debates by both Houses. One of the speakers in the Lok Sabha was Dr. Karan Singh¹ who said , “This is now a leap into the unknown, as it were. It could conceivably be the most important single Bill ever passed by this House because it deals not simply with material manifestation, not even with the collective human manifestation, but it deals with something which is still beyond the ken of human consciousness, it deals with an idea which is an arrow into the future.”



¹ Dr. Karan Singh is a prominent personality in India. Son of the last Maharaja of Kashmir, he was for a few years the governor of this Indian state after the independence. He then became a young cabinet minister in the central government. Deeply connected to the Ashram and Auroville, he had a more or less formal role of liaison at the highest level during the first years of Auroville. When Indira Gandhi came back to power early 1980, he wrote to her requesting a government’s intervention in Auroville’s troubled affairs. After the enactment of the Auroville Foundation Act, he became in February 1991 the first Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. Nominated again in 2005, he continues to watch over the progression of Auroville.

The unlikely story of the Auroville Ordinance

The following text is an insertion and is therefore not the literal transcription of the talk. When Kireet Joshi read it, he proposed a few corrections, and in particular he gave the detailed story of the Auroville Ordinance episode that we integrally insert below due to its special interest.

On 17 November 1980, the Indian Parliament was to meet. Around mid-October, Kireet was suddenly called by Indira Gandhi – who was the then Prime Minister – to a Cabinet meeting (with the main ministers of the Central Government). Kireet rushed out of his office to attend, but when he arrived the meeting had already begun. R.K. Dhawan, Indira's personal secretary informed her that Kireet had arrived. She asked for him. When Kireet entered the room, Indira Gandhi asked him to take a seat next to her – a huge honor for a simple functionary who is not supposed to attend a Cabinet meeting since these are restricted to Cabinet members only. She told him: “Kireetji, please take a seat and talk to them about Auroville.” Kireet then explained the Auroville situation to all the ministers and at the end of this presentation and the brief discussion that followed – some ministers friends of Navajata tried to intervene in favor of the SAS but they were rapidly contradicted by other ministers like Vasant Sathe – there was an agreement on the fact that the ordinance project prepared by the Law Minister was faulty on one point, the fact that the residents of Auroville were nowhere in the picture. Narasimha Rao, the then Foreign Affairs minister, declared: “We should not give the impression to want to introduce the control of the government in Auroville. We therefore have to amend the ordinance.”

Indira did not say anything but turned towards Kireet and told him: "Do the necessary." She then left the meeting.

The same evening, Kireet worked with Mr. Peri Shastri who was Secretary at the Law Ministry. Very quickly, in a few minutes, they agreed on the concept of an International Advisory Council, an idea of Kireet, with the following definition:

The International Advisory Council of Auroville will be composed with no more than five members named by the Central Government.

The Central Government will choose the International Advisory Council's members amongst personalities they deem dedicated to the ideals of human unity, peace and progress.

The Council, on its own initiative or in reference to a request made by the Central Government, can give its advice to the Central Government on any subject connected to the development and administration of Auroville.

By addressing its comments to the Central Government, the Council will try to ensure that:

the ideals for which Auroville has been created are encouraged;

the freedom to grow and to develop activities and institutions for the accomplishment of the aspirations and programs envisaged in the Auroville's Charter is maintained for the residents of Auroville.

The next morning, Kireet showed the concept to Indira Gandhi. She approved it and asked him to show it to the other ministers. Kireet went to see Narasimha Rao who approved it and then Shiv Shankar, who was the Law Minister and who also approved it (of course they were aware that Indira had already approved it). Then the Ordinance was to be sent to the Cabinet's Secretariat.

Up to that time, this ordinance project was kept secret. But

eventually there came a leak from the Cabinet's Secretariat. By 24 October 1980, it was known that an ordinance was in preparation regarding Auroville or the SAS. Immediately, the SAS began to strike. Letters were sent to the President of India and a legal action was launched in the Calcutta High Court (where the SAS had its headquarters).

An ordinance can only be promulgated after being signed by the President. Normally, it is directly sent to the President by the secretariat of the Cabinet, but in that case, the Cabinet Secretary gave the document to Kireet and Indira told him to bring it himself to the President. (The president was Mr. N. Sanjeeva Reddy who had been elected during the Janata Government and therefore was not particularly close to the present Prime Minister.)

Kireet went to the office of the President. It so happened that the secretary of the President was a personal friend of Kireet, since they had been together at the school of training for the Indian Administration Service (IAS). The secretary told Kireet that a number of letters opposing this ordinance project had come and the President had read them all.

Kireet told him that the Cabinet had approved the ordinance and asked him to kindly give it to the President so that he could sign it. It was already November 4th and time was short (when the Cabinet approves an ordinance, the President is normally obliged to sign. He can return it once to the Cabinet but if the Cabinet approves it again, he has to sign it.)

When the Secretary returned from the President's office, he told Kireet that the President was about to sign when a phone call came from the Law Secretary who asked him not do it because an injunction had been sent by a judge in the Calcutta High Court to forbid the President to sign any ordinance that would come regarding Auroville or the SAS. The President was furious and said: "Who dares give orders to the President? It is a crazy move!" The Law Secretary replied: "Yes, President Sir, I agree with you but it is an order from the Court and in my view, you

should not sign.”

The secretary friend of Kireet therefore came back with the unsigned ordinance. Kireet immediately went to meet Indiraji to explain the problem. Her reaction: “Please go straight away to Calcutta and have the injunction removed.” (Kireet remarked here that Indira did not waste time into recriminations. She simply said: have it removed!)

The next day, on November 5th 1980, Kireet went to Calcutta with his personal secretary, Mr. Arora, who had taken with him a small portable typing machine that Mother had given to Kireet. Kireet met the Government advocate who told him: “We will do the needful on November 17th.” – “Why not tomorrow?” asked Kireet. The advocate said that they were in the midst of the big Calcutta festivals and judicial holidays but not to worry, it would be done just after that. Kireet replied it was not acceptable and went on explaining why it should be done before November 10th. He added: “Please, help me.”

The lawyer then went to his office and called the judge in charge during the legal holidays [who was the very person who had written the injunction]. The judge answered that he would hear the case on November 17th and that he would take it up first thing.

At this moment, Kireet felt as if he was burning and heard an inner voice saying: “You must speak to the judge yourself.” He then asked the advocate: “Could you manage so that I speak to the judge?” The advocate laughed and said: “Impossible, one can only speak to him through a lawyer.” Kireet insisted, “Please, please.” The lawyer could not resist Kireet’s plea. He went back to his office, called the judge and told him: “Sir, Kireet Joshi who came from Delhi wants to speak to you.” — “Tell Mr. Kireet Joshi I will hear the case today itself at 4.00 pm. I will remove the injunction. But you must inform the other party.”

It was 10.00 am. For Kireet it sounded like a miracle. He started to explain the matter to the Government advocate but

the latter interrupted him saying that he was not a constitutional advocate. They went and saw seven advocates, each refusing for some reason or another. It was nearly 1.00 pm. Kireet asked: "Isn't there any advocate who can plead our cause?" The Government advocate answered: "There is one I can recommend, but he is a special advocate, he is a convinced communist and he is the general advocate of the Calcutta Government. How will he take your story? It's already very difficult to meet him."

Kireet then said: "Let's try and meet him." [At this point of his report, Kireet remarked that Mother said that perseverance is the key to success.]

The advocate brought Kireet to the general advocate, Mr. Acharya. Kireet then, in a few minutes, tried to explain the matter regarding religion. Mr. Acharya said: "Mr. Joshi, you don't need to explain this to me. Durga is speaking through you; I accept your cause, I will come at 4.00 pm and have this injunction removed. How can a judge block the President? My pleading will be one sentence."

It was then 1.30 pm.

At 4 pm they went to the judge's house. There were 3 big lawyers on the side of Society, who spoke about religion: Auroville was a religious undertaking, therefore beyond the powers of the Government to control. It was Kireet's wrongful personal campaign against the SAS. In short, the Government cannot enter into religious affairs and the problem only arose because of the wrongful intent of Mr. Joshi.

Kireet's lawyer simply said: "About religion and other matters, we shall see later but first show me in the Constitution where it is said that President's powers can be restrained by a judge."

The judge said: "You are right! [It was the same judge who had put the injunction a few days before!!!] I am lifting the injunction."

Now the judgment had to be written. "Sir, kindly give me the written judgment." The judge answered: "Today I have no typist".

Mr. Arora, Kireet's personal secretary, stood up and said: "Sir, I can do any typing". The judge said: "I don't have a typewriter". So Arora pulled up the typewriter given by the Mother: "Sir, here is the typewriter!"

So the judge dictated the judgment, signed it and gave it to the lawyer. Mr. Acharya gave it to Kireet and said: "Now fly!"

Kireet and Arora flew back, showed the judgment to the Law Secretary and he gave the certificate for the President. It was now November 7th.

Then Kireet went to the President's house. By this time the President was much more reluctant. His reply was that the Prime Minister should speak to him personally, only then he would sign.

So Kireet's friend, the president's secretary, told Kireet: "Please make the Prime Minister speak to the President."

Kireet then went to the PM's house, only to hear that she was in Kerala and her exact whereabouts were not known. Kireet told R.K. Dhawan, her personal assistant, to please locate the PM. Now it was November 8th. He could only contact the PM by 9th morning. She was so kind, she called the President from Kerala. Then the President signed.

The President's secretary sent the document to Kireet on November 9th. It had now to be gazetted in order to have official validity. The Law Secretary sent a special note to the Government Press and on the night of November 9 it was printed. And on November 10 it was announced.

The Auroville case goes to the Supreme Court

So now one feels that everything is fine, the administrators come. There were two of them: Mr Nigam who was a former judge of the Allahabad High Court in the state of Uttar Pradesh, a very nice and charming man, yet very sharp whenever needed, and Mr. Ojha who was quite a different type of person. P.N. Ojha was crafty enough, having been a policeman. He kept saying, “I know about people, having been in the police, so one should not try to tell me stories...” But this somewhat strangely assorted couple did work quite well in effect, as Mr. Ojha had a lot of respect for Justice Nigam who was so evidently an upright gentleman. They began the formal process of taking over according to the terms of the Ordinance.

The SAS launched an immediate counter-attack by registering a case in the High Court of Calcutta. One can consider the way they did it as a kind of perjury, as they gave as the main ground for it the fact that Auroville was like a religious denomination and the writings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo were basically religious. It was quite a colossal perjury but it was in fact the only thing they could do to win the case. Why? Because if Auroville were to be recognized by the Court as something religious, the Government of India had no right to interfere.

So a court case was launched by the SAS in Calcutta. As you may know, in India, court cases can last very long, there are cases which have started in the 19th century which are not yet concluded! Therefore the SAS case at Calcutta could have remained there for several years and then go to the Supreme Court and again wait for several years as it is often a very long process there. But something quite extraordinary happened: the case came very quickly before the Supreme Court. They took it very seriously, forming a constitutional bench of five judges, including the Chief Justice as it was seen as a constitutional case. And, quite soon, the case begun.

You have to understand the situation: Kireet Joshi, who was in charge of the Auroville case, had also to deal with his work as a high functionary in the Education Ministry, a considerable charge. Yet he had to manage the Auroville case, which was also very demanding. It is at that moment that Sanjeev appeared: he was a lawyer at the Delhi High Court and, having heard of the Auroville case, he came to Kireetbhai to offer his help¹.

Dealing with the Supreme court case proved to be very exhausting. The SAS had quite a lot of money and they hired one of the best lawyers of India, Soli Sorabjee – who later became Attorney-General of India and who, still today, writes a column every Sunday in the Indian Express. He is known to be a good upright person. In this SAS case, he pleaded remarkably well. I remember Frederick – who was often in Delhi for the case – telling me : “At a certain moment, we both went out of the Supreme Court building and I saw Kireet turn towards me and in his glance I could see that we both felt the same, that the case was going very badly for us.” Soli Sorabjee had made a brilliant submission and they felt that the judges had been powerfully impressed.

Thanks to the support of J.R.D. Tata, the great legendary Indian industrialist, who had already proved to be a great supporter of Auroville, we could get Fali Nariman, a very noted lawyer, to work on our side. But, nevertheless, when it is a Government case, the main lawyer is a government advocate. The government lawyer was a Mr. Parasaran who did not seem to understand much and Kireet and others felt quite concerned. He clearly did not make the grade in front of Soli Sorabjee. It got to the point where, the day before Parasaran was due to appear and plead our case, during the night, as Kireet told me later, he prayed to The Mother in (approximately) the following terms: “I do not know what is your will in this case, but things don’t seem to be going too well. I have

1 Sanjeev Aggarwal, a Delhi lawyer and future Aurovilian, had come to visit the Auroville Today exhibition in Delhi in February 1980. It was his first contact with Auroville.

a feeling that something decisive should be told to these judges so that they may understand the difference between religion and yoga.” That was indeed the crux of the matter in this case, how to make the difference between Religion and Yoga.

Kireet then went to sleep and, as he recalled later, he had a dream in which he saw a kind of parchment on which a formula was written. The dream was so strong and so precise that he could remember the formula in the morning and write it down. When he met Parasaran before his submission to the court, he told him that it was crucial that he should very precisely and clearly pronounce these words during the course of his pleading:

Philosophy, religion and yoga – all aim at God, but the method of philosophy is that of ratiocination; the method of religion is creedal belief, rituals and ceremonies; and the method of yoga is to arrive at change of consciousness through change of consciousness.

Kireet later said that when Parasaran did give that formula he heard the Chief Justice say: “That’s it!” From that crucial moment, the situation changed, things moved in a more positive way.

But – again a “but” – in October 1982, less than two years after the promulgation of the Auroville ordinance, Kireet learned that Indira Gandhi had decided not to seek the prolongation of the Auroville takeover. Prolongations of the Act had to be sanctioned by the Parliament every two years as it was a law of temporary nature. It was a mere formality but it had to be done. When Kireet asked the reason, he was told by one of her closest advisors that other advisors had told the PM that the Government was going to lose the Auroville case in the Supreme Court and she wanted to avoid the embarrassment of one more lost case.

At that point, Kireet was able to convince this very senior advisor to go to the PM and tell her that the Government was surely going to win the Auroville case. As Indira Gandhi had a special

respect for that person, she believed him and gave her consent to seek the renewal of the takeover in the Parliament.

How could Kireet be so certain? It is because, meanwhile, he had become quite close to the Chief Justice, who, at one point, made him quite an extraordinary proposal, that Kireet himself should secretly write the basic argument in favor of the Government takeover of Auroville, which could be used in the final legal document. Kireet did it and told me later that most of what he had written had been retained. It is how he knew for sure what was going to happen.

It shows once more how things tend to move for Auroville, at all times poised very delicately between victory and defeat.

Indeed on November 8, 1982, the decision of the Supreme Court was given. Out of 5 judges, 4 said that Sri Aurobindo's writings were not religion. The 5th one, who wrote a dissenting judgment, wrote that he felt that it was rather religious. But, on the other hand, he said that, after all that had been heard about the mismanagement of Auroville by the SAS, he felt, like his esteemed colleagues, that the temporary Government takeover was justified. So it was nearly unanimous but for the difference about the religion aspect.

What is a little sad is that in the Ashram – some people will not like my saying so – there was no official protest, with the exception of one quite well known Ashramite, A.B. Patel. Some Ashramites did say that it was scandalous that the Ashram leaders let the SAS take that position about Sri Aurobindo and religion. One of the trustees of the Ashram commented that the SAS did whatever they had to do to have a chance to win the case.

So the takeover could start again. But this was sometimes difficult as there were quite a bit of resistance here and there. Nevertheless, progressively, the totality of the SAS properties came under control and were given to Aurovilians to manage under the supervision of the administrators.

Search for a permanent solution and recurrent difficulties

The problem still looming large was the temporary nature of the takeover and the need to find a permanent solution. Immediately therefore, from 1983 onwards, it became a big preoccupation for Kireet. I remember that, during a trip that I did to France early 1984, I came to know that Kireet was in Geneva for a UNESCO conference. I called him and he asked me if I could come, as he was having quite a bit of free time during this conference and he felt we could work together on a draft solution for Auroville. I did go and spent 3 very nice days with him trying to look into a possible permanent framework for Auroville. Kireet was the typist – we had borrowed a typing machine – and we did prepare a sort of draft. I don't know how much of what we thought about then came in the final framework, probably not that much, but it is just to say that there was a continuing effort, particularly on Kireet's side, to reflect on that subject.

From 1983 to 1986, nothing much happened regarding steps towards a permanent solution. In 1986, the members of the International Advisory Council – the council which had been established by the law of the temporary takeover of Auroville – came to Auroville. They were high-level people: there was the Minister of External Affairs, Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao, the director general of UNESCO, Mr M'Bow, and the most eminent captain of industry in India, Mr. J.R.D. Tata. (Mrs Lyudmila Zhivkova, minister of Culture in her country, Bulgaria, a very remarkable woman, had also been a member but, unfortunately, had died prematurely in the early 80s.) Kireet was the Member-secretary of the Council.

The three members came to Auroville with Kireet in 1986 to discuss about the steps to be taken to solve the Auroville problem. The outcome of their meeting was that they decided to request the Government of India to pass an Auroville Foundation Act – this is

when the name was decided upon.

In 1987, an atmosphere of skepticism and doubt about Auroville was growing, particularly in Delhi. Why? The SAS was very active. Of course, they did not abandon the struggle and they had lots of contacts in India. They had many Aurobindo centers all over India and quite a few MPs and ministers were their friends.

October 1987 brought a new shock: Narasimha Rao, the minister and chairman of the Auroville International Advisory Council, told Kireet that he was not convinced that the takeover law should be again renewed: “We have tried to see if these people could manage to live together but neither the Aurovilians nor the SAS people are ready for that. It is really tiring, why should we continue, why should we bother with this? I am not sure that we ought to renew the takeover.” In addition, there was an attack by some MPs – no doubt prompted by the SAS – casting doubts about the necessity of the renewal.

Kireet had asked Frederick to come to Delhi, as the situation was becoming very critical, to the point that there was a real fear that the law will lapse through lack of parliamentary approval in time. In such case, it would be like a collapse, the SAS would recover everything.

Finally, sometime later, Narasimha Rao said something like: “As these people are not able to come to terms, we shall create a governing board composed of independent people, neither SAS or Aurovilians.” This idea of Narasimha Rao was in fact an important element in the solution. Kireet felt it was like a breakthrough.

So Kireet was authorized to prepare the necessary official papers and the renewal of the takeover did happen. But the Minister was quite strongly questioned by some MPs who said that the law of takeover was supposed to last 5 years. “Now it is already seven years and it will continue at least two years further. When will it ever end if you continue to renew again and again?” To that the Minister answered that there was a solution in preparation and he could give the assurance that it would be acted upon

in a matter of months, maybe even of weeks. There was a very strong pressure.

A difficult problem finds a solution

Another thing had happened meanwhile. I have spoken of this Mr. Parasaran who was the lawyer representing the government in the Auroville case and whose understanding was felt to be rather limited. Afterwards he had become Attorney General and a very important question for Auroville was put to him. This very important question was about the Auroville properties. If the Government was to pass a law which would take the SAS out of Auroville, there was the question of financial compensation as the Auroville properties were legally SAS properties. It was a difficult problem because the compensation level was likely to be very high and the Government had no funds for such payment. In addition, it was felt morally unjustified to pay the SAS for properties they had mostly acquired with funds coming from donations for Auroville, often obtained thanks to the generous tax exemptions linked to the Auroville project. It would be very difficult to justify such compensation at the political level and it would also be giving to the SAS lots of funds which they could eventually use in their struggle to recover Auroville.

Those were the concerns. At one point, the SAS had said that, subject to certain conditions, they would be prepared to donate the properties, but the Law ministry had ruled this possibility out, stating that nothing short of acquisition would be legally tenable. At the time, it was estimated that the amount of financial compensation would be two crores of rupees, a considerable sum then that would be politically very difficult for any government to justify paying for Auroville, even assuming that it would be prepared to do so, which was rather unlikely. So it was really a major problem. The minister in charge, Narasimha Rao, decided

to place it in front of the competent authority in the Government.

The competent authority was no one else than our friend Parasaran, who had meanwhile become Attorney General. Now, to the happy surprise of Kireet, he gave a clear opinion in favor of Auroville which was roughly saying the following:

As we [the Government] are going to take the lands and properties of Auroville to continue the same project, there is no need to pay any compensation. If the SAS goes to court and the court decides that it should be compensated, then the Government will pay.

What was important is that the opinion of the Attorney General is statutorily such that the government is compelled to accept it. Kireet was very happy as it was solving a major problem for which there was no obvious solution. That happened in 1987 and it was a good thing.

Several bad news

The first bad news: Towards the end of 1987 the Auroville file was taken out of Kireet's hands. There had been a sustained campaign against him conducted mostly by the SAS but also by some Aurovilians, individually, or as part of a small group of Aurovilians calling themselves "Neutrals", who felt alienated from the line taken by the majority of Aurovilians. So all these people were sending letters of complaints.

The problem in such situations of severe conflict is that people who feel unhappy are more likely to write letters of complaints. Those who are satisfied, even if they are in larger number, may not think of writing to express support. The result was that the Minister, Narasimha Rao, had a thick file of letters "against" and a very thin file of supportive letters.

Kireet was very conscious of the pressure on the Minister. Sometime before, he had an inner experience in which there was an insistence on renunciation, including on his direct responsibilities for Auroville affairs. So he told the Minister that he knew how much pressure there was on him, that he was prepared to accept the Auroville file being taken out of his hands. The Minister was obviously very relieved and told Kireet: “No one knows the Auroville affairs as much as you do, so you must remain in charge even if officially the responsibility of the file is given to someone else.”

Nevertheless, in practice, Kireet lost the Auroville file. We shall see later that Veera Raghavan, the high functionary who got the file, came rapidly under the influence of the SAS, a fact which did create a lot of problems.

The other bad news was the outcome of repeated unjust attacks against Justice Nigam, the Auroville administrator. This resulted in his contract not being renewed by the Government on March 31st 1988. The blow was mitigated by the fact that the new administrator was Baldev Mahajan, who had been a very close collaborator of Kireet.

The same Baldev Mahajan came to Auroville in his new capacity as Auroville administrator in April or May 1988 and said to quite a few Aurovilians something like: “Are you sleeping or what? The situation is very critical; there is hardly any time left. We have to find a solution as it is not at all certain that the takeover law can be renewed once more. What are you doing? I have sleepless nights about it and you? Are you just sleeping?”

Several Aurovilians went to Delhi but things were not moving. At about the same time, a Task Force was constituted in Auroville to work on this problem with Kireet. In this Task Force, there were Frederick, Krishna Tewari and myself, I don’t remember the others. Our mission was to work with the Aurovilians and Kireet to find a solution.

In April 1988, there was a very strange meeting in Chennai (then Madras) in which Narasimha Rao, who was both the Minister

in charge of Auroville and the chairman of the International Advisory Council, requested representatives of Auroville and representatives of the SAS to come to a posh hotel for a meeting. It was quite strange and rather funny as it was not really a meeting with Auroville on one side and the SAS on the other: the Minister was receiving the parties separately and then conveyed to each party the comments of the other. It was a rather surreal scene and I suspect that he went through that strange exercise to be able to tell Parliament that he personally did try in vain to find a way of conciliation between the parties in the Auroville conflict.

The Aurovilians took the opportunity to tell Narasimha Rao that they did not want to be represented in the Governing Board of the proposed Foundation but also that it should be composed of independent personalities. A letter was sent to Delhi to confirm the Aurovilian view that there should be neither Aurovilians nor SAS representatives in the proposed Governing Board.

Also in April 1988, Veera Rhagavan, the high functionary who was now in charge of the Auroville file instead of Kireet, had been told that the Government had decided to have a Law for Auroville and that he should prepare a draft Bill. For unknown reasons, Veera Raghavan did nothing. As nothing was happening, Kireet requested that members of the Task Force should come to Delhi to try to do something about the situation.

Three remarkable weeks in Delhi Birth of the Auroville Foundation Act

So finally, I am now coming to the main topic of this conference, the actual making of the Auroville Foundation Act. On August 17, 1988, Frederick, Krishna and myself reached Delhi. It was the beginning of three quite extraordinary weeks during which the Auroville Act, yet unwritten, will be elaborated, vetted by several government authorities and finally voted by both Houses of

Parliament, with, in between, numerous occasions where we had to find ways to intervene to avoid potential disasters.

The day after our arrival, on August 18, we were able to meet the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. We met him through a group reception in the garden of his residence, something he was doing three times a week to be able to receive more people in a relatively short time. We got this appointment, which was still not so easy to get as so many people wanted to meet him, thanks to Mani Shankar Aiyar, a great friend of Aster who was working in the PM's office. So we were able to stand in a corner of the big garden in the PM's residence.

When we saw Rajiv Gandhi, we told him that we were aware that the Government had decided to make a law for Auroville and that we were concerned that our adversaries, the SAS, who were quite powerful and influential, with contacts everywhere in India, would try to pervert whatever good plans were intended. Rajiv Gandhi then told us that if we were to find out that there was a problem, we should inform him. What was interesting is that he left us then came back to repeat that we should tell him about any problem cropping up in relation to this Government project for Auroville. It showed that he really meant what he said but, as we saw later, it would not be so easy in practice to find a way to alert the Prime Minister.

Surprising request for a draft bill

On Monday August 20th, Baldev Mahajan, the Auroville administrator, who was now working under Veera Raghavan, the high functionary now in charge of the Auroville file, called us to tell us approximately the following: “ There is a need for a draft of an Auroville bill. It is already three months since the Government has decided that such a draft should be prepared. But Veera Raghavan has done nothing and now he is asking me to prepare it. So now I

am asking you to provide me with a draft.”

We said : “OK, but when do you need it?”— “In two days!!!”

We went out quite flabbergasted, wondering what to do, if we should call some people from Auroville, like Sanjeev, who had some legal knowledge, to work out something. We went back to Kireet’s residence at Talkatora Road and we told him: “We have just seen Mahajan and he told us that he needs a draft bill for Auroville in just two days!”

Kireet’s reaction was typical of his calm demeanor. He just said: “All right”. And he began immediately to dictate. As Frederick said in an interview, he just began the long list of “Whereas, Whereas ... which is found at the beginning of any law.

Of course some people, who may be critical of the Auroville Foundation Act for whatever reasons, may then say, upon hearing this, that they now understand that it was a rushed job done in two days and that it explains why it is so bad from their point of view.

Frederick, in an interview that he gave at the time, had a nice metaphor. He said that it was as if a King had requested a Zen painter to do a special painting for him for a certain date. This painter seemed to do nothing for months but, at the appointed day, in front of the King and the whole court, he did a beautiful painting with a few strokes only. It was the result of his concentration of the past months.

When Kireet was asked how he could have dictated this draft law in less than 48 hours, he simply said: “I was ready”. It is indeed true that he had personally worked a lot on this question, that he had consulted lots of people, including of course many Aurovilians and it is why he was able to do what he did. During the long moments of dictation – we were present most of the time –, he would often stop and discuss alternatives with us.

We went back to Baldev Mahajan with the draft before the time limit of 48 hours that he had set, on August 22nd, in the morning. This episode is another example of remarkable happenings in favor of Auroville: normally, drafting the law should have been

made by some bureaucrat in the ministry of Human Resource Development. Moreover, Kireet, at that time, was no longer in the administration. His contract, to be renewed every year, was not renewed after March 31st 1988 due to some manipulation from hostile bureaucrats. So the fact that the making of the draft bill was delivered into his hands in August was a first miracle, which happened thanks to Mahajan who boldly took it upon himself to ask us for the draft.

A very serious problem comes up

After three days, on August 25th, first alert, we learn that Veera Raghavan has added in the draft law an article which made mandatory the consultation of the SAS for the constitution of the Governing Board. This could be thought as a relatively minor modification but Kireet took it as a very serious setback. Since the SAS people were on the spot, near Auroville and in Pondicherry, they would be considered as experts and their suggestions would carry a lot of weight with bureaucrats, which may practically mean that they would be able to choose most of the members of a Governing Board in charge of Auroville affairs.

So it was very serious and unacceptable but what to do was not so clear. It had been approved by the Minister, who was no longer Narasimha Rao, as there had been a Government reshuffle. The new Minister was Shiv Shankar, who did not know anything about Auroville, and he had effectively approved this insertion of the mandatory consultation requirement. More alarming, we heard that Narasimha Rao had also approved the insertion and that was an even more serious blow as it meant that only the Prime Minister could do something about it. But the problem was that it was extremely difficult to contact the PM, despite what he had told us. It was not obvious at all. And Kireet himself was no longer in the administration.

The first thing that happened next was that Kireet was called by Narasimha Rao on a file which had nothing to do with Auroville. It gave Kireet the opportunity to ask Narasimha Rao (who was now again minister for External Affairs, the ministry he liked best) whether he did approve the insertion of the SAS mandatory consultation requirement in the Auroville draft bill. Narasimha Rao said that he did not approve of any such insertion. He added that Kireet should speak to Veera Raghavan and tell him that it is not true that he approved. Kireet phoned Veera Raghavan and told him about what NR had said. Veera Raghavan got very angry and told Kireet that all these politicians were lying and Narasimha Rao had approved. He took the opportunity to tell Kireet that he felt it was very unfair to completely exclude the SAS from Auroville: “These people have worked a lot for Auroville and you people are not prepared to give them anything.”

The situation had become quite critical. We knew that the draft bill was soon to be given to the official printing press so that it could be presented to Parliament. If it were to be printed with the insertion, it would make things very difficult. Sir CPN Singh, this great friend and helper of Auroville, commented that if the law was passed with the insertion, Aurovilians should vacate Auroville! He felt it was that serious.

Then Kireet told us that he did not know what to do. The only person who could do something about it was the PM but there was no way to contact him. If the bill were to be passed like that, it would be as if we were giving Auroville on a plate to the SAS. He added very gravely, “At this point I do not know what is Mother’s will.” He then went to his room to pray and meditate.

Hardly five minutes later, there was a phone call for Kireet, in which he was told that he was expected to come to a function in which the PM would be present. Kireet was a member of the administrative committee of a school which had been selected to participate in an important Hindu festival, the Raksha Bandhan, with the Prime Minister.

So Kireet came out of his room and told us: “Tomorrow there is an opportunity to meet the PM.” It was felt as something rather miraculous, suddenly everything was open again. But we were not sure how to proceed. The three of us, Frederick, Krishna and I, having met the PM only about a week ago, we could not really hope to see him again easily. So we wrote a letter that the president of the school – she was the daughter of Sir CPN Singh – would give to the PM when he came for the function, in which we reminded Rajiv Gandhi of what he had told us and we informed him that indeed there were serious problems for which we wanted to see him again.

So the next day we went again to the residence of the PM and waited outside, hoping for the best. Kireet went to the function, the PM came and when he sat down to listen to a song by the schoolchildren, our letter was put on his knees by Pratibha Singh. He asked her what it was. She answered that it was about Auroville and that there were problems. The PM said that they were about to do the necessary to solve the problems of Auroville. She repeated that there were problems created by the SAS people and that he should agree to see us. Then Rajiv opened the letter and later told his security people to allow us to come in.

The small ceremony with the school was soon over and Rajiv Gandhi was about to leave. He went over to Kireet to greet him and shake hands. He turned away to go. Kireet later said that at that moment he prayed to the Mother: “Is that all? Is it what you want? Let Thy will be done.”

Suddenly Rajiv, who had already left, came back and took Kireet’s hand. He told him: “Kireetji, you know that we are preparing an Aurobindo law?” (Strangely, he did speak of an Aurobindo law). Kireet answered: “No Sir, an Auroville law”. The PM said: “I am told that there are problems about this, is it true?” – “Yes Sir, it will be a disaster”, Kireet answered. Then, remarkably, Rajiv said: “You only know what Indiraji wanted for Auroville. I want you to take charge. Call Vasudev (additional

secretary in the PM's office) and do the necessary. I will not move this till I know you are satisfied.”

Despite the fact that for a few months Kireet had not been part any longer of the government administration, the PM put him in charge. It shows how much he sincerely wanted to do what his mother Indira Gandhi had wanted for Auroville.

What is quite extraordinary in that story is that we may wonder if Rajiv had not forgotten that Kireet was no longer in the Government. But at that time, the PM was still all-powerful,¹ so nobody questioned when Kireet did call the concerned officers, told them about the orders of the PM and therefore he could do the necessary to get the insertion removed. Later Veera Raghavan himself called Kireet to tell him with some eagerness that he had removed the infamous sentence.

What we learned also (a secret information from some minister friend who was in the government cabinet) is that in the next cabinet meeting, while presenting the note describing the salient features of the Auroville bill that needed to be approved by the Cabinet before going to Parliament, the then minister of HRD, Shiv Shankar, did again put the question about a SAS consultative role in the law. We were told that Rajiv Gandhi was adamant: “Nothing doing, we do not want these people to be involved.” It was so categorical that nobody dared to question again.

The J.R.D. Tata episode

Yet the day after, on Sunday, Kireet was not entirely satisfied. He felt that there still were some modifications introduced by Veera

¹ This all-powerful position of the PM did not last much longer: less than three months later, he was embroiled in the Bofors scandal – around the purchase of big guns (the well-known Bofors guns) from a Swedish firm which had allegedly paid huge bribes to the ruling party. This scandal would ultimately contribute to his party losing the next elections in 1989. It shows that this period was really the last moment where Rajiv Gandhi could still take time to deal with Auroville.

Raghavan which were problematic for the future. Kireet told Frederick that, at this moment, the only person who could still help was Tata, the well-known great industrialist and member of the Auroville International Advisory Council. He asked Frederick to call him. Frederick was quite close to Tata, whom he had often met and was calling “Jeh” (for Jehangir) as only few intimates were doing.

Frederick said, “All right, I call Tata, to tell him what?”

“You tell him to come.”

“Yes, but when?”

“Now, immediately, it is urgent”.

I can still see the scene: Frederick takes the phone and calls Tata, whom he gets quite quickly. And he tells him: we are in Delhi for this Auroville bill, there are problems as the draft that we had given had been seriously modified, it has become quite a big problem and there is a feeling that he should come as only his intervention could save the day....

So Tata says: “All right, but when?”

Frederick: “Well, Jeh, right now...”

According to Frederick, Tata’s sarcastic reaction was something like, “Ah, of course, Frederick, no problems, I am only the chairman of Tatas and Sons, I am quite free, with no appointments whatsoever, of course I can just come immediately...”

“Yes, Jeh, I know, but it is very very critical and...”

“All right, give me Kireet...”

Again I remember that, when Kireet took the phone, he sat straighter, as if suddenly standing at attention, and he listened to Tata. What we heard was only something like, “Yes, Sir, yes Sir, it is very necessary that you come, Sir, all right, Sir...”

There were several reasons for this urgent call: Tata was a member of the Auroville International Advisory Council, which gave him the right to intervene, he also had a great personal prestige in India. Kireet knew that Veera Raghavan had a special respect for Tata and, further, that, after his retirement which

would come quite soon, he was hoping to find some position in the Tata organization.

What is really admirable is that, the same evening, Tata came. It showed the depth of his commitment to Auroville, as he must have had to cancel all his appointments for the following Monday.

We went to see him in his big suite in the Taj hotel (part of the Tata group). The meetings with Tata would usually begin with him being quite gruff, questioning rather sharply about the necessity of this or that, but, after a while, when he was satisfied to some extent at least, he would become friendly and accommodating. Kireet explained the problems and the points that needed to be modified in the draft bill. The next morning, we heard that Veera Raghavan had accepted quite everything. We supposed that Tata had asked him to come and told him what was to be done. Apparently Raghavan did not dare to object.

The last suspenseful days

In the last days of August, Frederick, Krishna and I went to meet MPs from the Rajya Sabha [the Indian Upper House] as we knew that the Auroville bill would be presented there first. Kireet's friends in the Government had told him that the introduction there would be easier than in the Lok Sabha where the SAS was supposed to have more MPs friends. On September 1st, the Auroville bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha. No problems. We were present. What was moving was the reading of the Auroville Charter by one MP, Mrs Najma Heptullah, member of a highly regarded Muslim political family – her father had been Vice-President of India. We later thanked her for that nice gesture.

Then there was a serious technical problem. The vote in the Rajya Sabha took place on Thursday. The last day of the parliamentary session was on Monday September 5th. There is a rule that there must be at least three working days after the vote of a bill

in one of the chambers of Parliament before it can be introduced in the other chamber. Friday, Saturday, Sunday do not count as working days in Parliament, so, theoretically, the Auroville bill could not be introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday, which was also the last day of the parliamentary session. It was really a big problem. If the bill voted by the Rajya Sabha was not voted by the Lok Sabha, it would remain like in suspense in the public domain, and of course we knew that in such case it would give the SAS all the time during the intersession of about two months to try to manipulate at all levels and influence many Lok Sabha MPs. Not only getting a positive vote would become uncertain but at the minimum there would be a big risk of problematic amendments to the bill.¹ So we felt quite tense as we could see that this was quite a serious problem.

The General Secretary of the Lok Sabha at that time was Subhash Kashyap, a close friend of Kireet – he would become later a member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. He took upon himself to put the Auroville bill on the list of bills to be passed that Monday. The last one, in fact. Then we heard that a zealous functionary under him had removed the Auroville bill from the list, precisely on account of the missing working days. But Kashyap again put it on the list!

Meanwhile something quite remarkable had occurred: there had been for a few days a kind of parliamentary strike by the Opposition who decided to abstain from regular parliamentary work on account of the mishandling of some local MPs in Andhra Pradesh by the police. During a manifestation of local MPs of the opposition, the police had intervened and apparently even beaten up some of them. Huge scandal! Parliamentary boycott! Opposition parties united and decided to abstain from any work

¹ In retrospect, it is easy to see that there would have been little chance of the Auroville bill being passed at all as the Bofors scandal had already erupted and little parliamentary work was performed at the next session during this very turbulent period in Indian politics.

till reparation was obtained. But the Parliament was still in session and, with hardly any debates, bills were passed quickly, a fact which did contribute to open the possibility for the Auroville bill to be on the list for that fateful Monday.

The final triumph

Then, finally, on the afternoon of Monday September 5, Frederick, Krishna and myself were in the gallery of the Lok Sabha. I must say that we were quite tense. We were hoping that this Auroville bill would effectively be put to vote. When we came in, there was a minister, Ajit Panja, who was talking. He was talking, talking, although the Lok Sabha was quite empty, only a few MPs were there. We were concerned that he was talking too much and wasting so much time when suddenly something funny happened. A lady MP rose up, went to Panja desk and placed a small note on it. He then looked at it and said something like: "I am told that there is an important bill to be voted upon for Auroville and that I take too much time." And he did conclude very quickly. The lady MP was Mamata Banerjee, who was already quite well known as a special personality, rather unpredictable as some people here who follow Indian politics like Claude Arpi would probably tell you. But whatever one may think of her, this is something that she did for Auroville.

Claude (Arpi): *Unconsciously!!*

I don't know about that but in a very material sense, she did it. So the vote begun. As you know, bills are voted article by article. And as it happens in quite all parliaments, there are often few MPs who are present and sort of represent their colleagues party-wise during the vote. It was the case in the Lok Sabha when the vote begun. But suddenly, we see lots of MPs both from the

majority and the opposition coming in. The MPs of the opposition came in with a yellow scarf, as yellow is a color associated with Andhra Pradesh. The Lok Sabha was filling up quickly with MPs from both sides. I felt quite nervous as I was wondering if this would not lead to the disruption of the on-going vote. We knew that there was to be a statement by Chidambaram, who was then Minister of State for Home Affairs, about the incident in Andhra Pradesh and they were coming for that. The statement was to be followed by a debate and a vote. So they all came, including some members being pushed on wheel chairs. And, contrary to my fear, they did not disrupt the vote, they just speeded it on, they added their voices so that the “Yah!” for each article became louder and louder – and surely there were among them quite a few friends of the SAS but it did not make a difference in the Yah momentum. When the speaker called for the final vote, for the bill in its totality after the vote article by article, I can still remember the enormous and resounding YAH that came out from the full Lok Sabha.

I must say that I saw the whole scene as an extraordinary *maya*, that Mother’s force which we felt so strongly operating during these strange days had managed to get a unanimous approval from a full Lok Sabha for the Auroville Bill at the very end of this parliamentary session. I remember that Frederick was sitting a few seats from me on the left, we looked at each other rather bewildered, it was difficult to believe that it was over, that it had been done!

We were a bit numb. We stayed on for a while and saw Chidambaram coming up and beginning to talk. He had hardly said a few sentences that there was an explosion of anger and for a while it looked as if there would be fistfights. Such was the tension. What came out was like some monstrous anger and I remembered having a subjective feeling that it came from elsewhere, because something quite momentous had happened and some huge anger needed to come out. OK, that’s it, I have finished.

Applause

Discussion

Claude: *Thanks, Alain. Now we have some time for questions or comments.*

A person in the audience: *It is important to note that the presentation of the Auroville bill by the minister Shiv Shankar should be read by Aurovilians. A law is made of legal sentences but what Shiv Shankar expressed in Parliament was the spirit of the Auroville bill and that made it quite a unique moment. He spoke about the reasons for this bill, that it was very important for the future of humanity that this law be there, to help and protect the Auroville project and provide autonomy for the Aurovilians.*

Alain: This presentation by Shiv Shankar had been written by Kireet.

Audience: *I think that there is something that you have omitted in your talk. It was not only a struggle between Auroville and the SAS, there was also the Ashram position; if I remember correctly, someone had asked the Ashram trustees if they also wanted to be part of a future Auroville administration and they immediately refused. So they withdrew from the conflict. Another detail, and it is a complement to your story, is that when Veera Raghavan came for the first time to Auroville, he was received by a few Aurovilians and some of us had the feeling that he did not understand what it was about, what was the conflict about, which was not merely a conflict about properties between the SAS and Auroville, but a larger conflict about the spiritual meaning, about the messages of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The discussion was intense enough*

for Veera Raghavan to agree to come another time to specially meet those of us who wanted to give him a more complete picture. When we explained to him that the Ashram [authorities] had forbidden the reading of Mother's Agenda in the Ashram, he was quite shocked. He could not understand how the Ashram could censure what Mother had said on Yoga. I believed that this did trouble him and that afterwards he was much more open with the Aurovilians.

Alain: When was it?

Audience: *It was quite soon after you had received him in Auromodele.*

Alain: Was it before or after the vote of the Auroville Act? Because in effect there has been a 3 year period before the enactment of the law after the vote, as things take a lot of time with the government, and Veera Raghavan was still in charge, and I believe that he came here after the vote. But I can say that, when the problem of preparing a bill came up, he was quite a lot under SAS influence. Kireet always maintained that he was honest in his way of thinking. This man was sincerely upset that Aurovilians could be so ungrateful towards people who had worked a lot for Auroville, whatever their faults. I do think he was sincere in this view but I also believe that he did not really understand the deeper issues. This encounter that you speak about, I have the feeling that it must have happened after the vote of the Auroville Foundation Act. Veera Raghavan was given charge of the Auroville file very late, towards the end of 1987.

Audience: *Alain, could you speak about the present situation with the Ashram? There are some people outside of Auroville who think that there is still a conflict between Auroville and the Ashram.*

Alain: I am not particularly competent on this subject but I think that it can be said that now there is no conflict with the Ashram. I believe that there are good relations with many Ashramites. In fact there always has been good relations with some Ashram departments. We did have a problem long ago with some Ashram trustees mostly on account of the Sri Aurobindo Society's influence. Take for instance the case of the bank account of Pour Tous Fund, in which there was at the time (1976) 16,000 Rupees, quite a small fortune in those days. The SAS had imposed new Indian signatories for this account besides the three of us foreigners. They were able to do that since the account could only be opened with their authorization. When Christine and I went to see Navajata to protest, saying that we could not accept the imposition of new signatories without a preliminary discussion, I remember that the managing Trustee of the Ashram was there. He was siding with the SAS and he was adamant. Their story was that the Indian Aurovilians had complained to them that there were only foreign signatories for the Pour Tous Account. So they had decided to nominate Indian signatories. We told him and Navajata that we were not against new signatories, but we could not accept the separation in two groups with one compulsory signature from each group. We could agree to any two or three from five signatories. But they were adamant as, obviously, their aim was to practically block the functioning of the Pour Tous Fund: the new signatories were Aurovilians obedient to them who would refuse to sign the cheques when later requested. So the Rs.16,000 remained in the account and about two years later, was simply appropriated by the SAS in total disregard of the wishes of the donors who had given these funds for the upkeep of Aurovilians.

Later I believe that a few Ashramites felt that they had given too much support to the SAS, that they had not been as neutral as they could have been.

But one has to admit that the situation was confusing for many of them. When I remember the beginnings of Auroville, with the

Ashramites mostly clad in white clothes and these youth from Auroville who would come sometimes in rags, with loin clothes and turbans on the head, often with beards... but such people were necessary to launch Auroville in the harsh prevailing conditions, they had to be on the rough side – and I have the utmost respect for those true pioneers who were there at our beginning. But quite a few of these people were really rough – not all of them, but still a good number. So the inherent clash of attitudes and cultures was quite considerable. Some Ashramites were even wondering why Mother had this strange idea of calling such people. It was not easy to understand and accept. I must add that the SAS had indeed a very difficult role to play. To be really able to manage Auroville in the right spirit with the kind of young people who had come would have been a very difficult task for these Ashramites on account of their cultural make-up and habits. Of course they did fail rather badly but one must be honest and admit that it was not easy task at all. Aurovilians of these days were rather tough and eccentric and this is how they survived the difficult challenges of the beginning.

What proved more painful afterwards were the divisions inside Auroville. Things did happen which were rather sad and they left psychological scars. In that sense it was a painful period and what happened was the result of our limitations while trying to do as best as we could in the circumstances.

Audience: *Alain, there is something in the Auroville Foundation Act which I have always felt extraordinary, even miraculous: the affirmation of the determining power of the Residents Assembly. Nevertheless we know through experience that, in terms of practical functioning, in terms of legality, it is something difficult to practice, to develop into a living and effective reality. It is so obvious that even the present Governing Board is hardly prepared to deal with it. The GB deals with the Working Committee and seems to feel that the Residents Assembly is hardly more than a concept,*

not something real. Could you tell us what inspired Kireet to give such importance to the Residents Assembly in the Act?

Alain: It is interesting that you should say that as it is one of the aspects that is least understood by quite many people. They do not understand the way this law has been done and they find it badly conceived because of some vagueness here and there, and in particular, about this concept of Residents Assembly. Precisely while dictating the RA paras, I remember that Kireet told us something like: “I don’t know if this will be accepted – because let us not forget that we do this draft bill but later it is the Law Ministry which decides whether a provision is acceptable or not – but I would not like to create a democratic system in Auroville with votes and the rest. At the same time I think it is very important that the importance of the Assembly of the Auroville residents should be recognized. Thus we give a legal status to the residents Assembly without specifications, keeping provisions vague enough so as to give the Aurovilians the possibility to evolve and gradually find the proper governing method. As it is, if the Aurovilians are able to be united, they will practically have the power.”

As we know, it is easier said than done! But I sincerely believe that with the Auroville Act as it is, we could use it in a better way. I also believe that it is not really correct for the Governing board to ignore the Residents Assembly, if that is what they are doing.

Audience: *You spoke about the first International Advisory Council of Auroville, with Tata, Narasimha Rao, etc. This Council was advising the Indian Government as per the provisions of the first Auroville Act, the Auroville (Emergency provisions) Act of 1980. In the second Auroville Act of 1988, its level has gone down a lot. They are no longer members of a high caliber, they are retired bureaucrats and they only advise the Governing Board. Do you remember how it came about? What happened is a bit tragic as, in the story you have told, if the then advisors had not*

been at the highest level, this Act would not even have come into existence.

Alain: It is true. It was a great disappointment. In the draft prepared by Kireet, the status was the same, the International Advisory Council was advising the Government. When the draft law finally came back after being vetted by the Law ministry, Kireet remarked that unfortunately they had lowered the level of the International Advisory Council. His explanation was that in most laws where there is a Governing Board, the Law ministry avoids creating a body inside the same organization which has the power to go above the Governing Board. I don't think that Kireet, at that time, felt he could intervene but he was very disappointed. He said two things: first the role of the International Advisory Council will be much less important, and this is something that we have seen. Secondly, the caliber of potential members will be lower because, automatically, being an advisor to the Government represents a different status than simply being advisor to a mere Governing Board. Unfortunately, there has been this point particularly, but also a few others, where the Law ministry has introduced modifications which were indeed seen as qualitatively inferior. So, yes, very regrettable indeed.

Audience: *If the Governing Board is above, it means the others are below and, in India, those below cannot advise those above.*

Alain: Yes, yes, it is true and in fact it is indeed what seems to be happening; one does not get the feeling that the advice of the International Advisory Council carries a lot of weight with the Governing Board.

Audience: *We define rules in Auroville and the Aurovilians believe that we have just to give them in writing to the Governing Board for getting them approved by the Government. It is not*

true, it is like a trap: when we propose rules, they are modified in Delhi, like we have seen with the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC). Most people who take decisions in Auroville actually function under the authority of the Governing Board instead of being answerable to the Residents Assembly, despite the fact that under the Law there are three authorities and not one only. It is assumed that it is the Governing Board that governs whereas there are actually three authorities with specified fields of governance.

We are responsible for that, most people here don't believe in the Residents Assembly, so why should the Governing Board believe in it?

Alain: Yes, that's true.

Audience: *I thank you very much for your talk as it has touched upon many things. I believe that all that was done at that time was very important but what concerns me today is the vision of the future. Twenty-two years have passed and I believe that we have to develop a vision of how it will evolve in the future. I don't see how this vision can come because twenty years in the political field is a lot of time and meanwhile the world has completely changed, we are no longer in the world of the eighties. The vision for the next generations in Auroville has to be developed. How do you see the development of the vision of the future of Auroville?*

Alain: Big question! To come back to what someone has just said, I am not concerned with defending the Auroville Foundation Act. It is what it is. But I have to say that, at that time, twenty-two years ago, there was a serious problem and something had to be done. Otherwise everything would have gone back to the SAS and it would have been a return to the previous situation.

Recently, I had an opportunity to speak to Shankar,¹ and there is something funny: I don't know why but I thought that I remembered him as a member of the Task Force, a strange idea as he had always been rather against whatever was suggested. I sent him a mail telling him that I thought he had been part of the Task Force, and could he tell me what he remembered? I received in return a long message where he was saying, "But no, not at all! Never been part of it. On the contrary I was against, etc., etc." in effect a very Shankarian reaction. Immediately afterwards he sent me another mail to tell me, "Well, it is OK. India being India, the Government is everywhere, so it was unavoidable that Auroville, in practical terms, would be controlled by the government, so there is no need to have any regrets..." And then a third one, reinforcing the second mail. What I wanted to say is that today we see mostly the drawbacks: the Secretary is not always what we would hope for, and it is the same with the Governing Board, the Auroville bureaucracy, etc., but there we have to be careful: the Auroville bureaucracy, it isn't only the Government, let us be honest. I remember Bala Baskar, who has been probably the best Secretary we ever had, saying: I know the Indian bureaucracy, and it is quite something but the Auroville bureaucracy, it is not bad also!

So let us admit: we see mostly these drawbacks. But the only problem is that we are absolutely unable to know what would have happened if there had been nothing. Knowing how things are here, Auroville would have been vulnerable. I would have expected local politicians, directly or indirectly, putting heavy pressures. In effect local people here don't try to touch it because it is considered as a central government project.

Even myself, honestly, I am a little disappointed seeing how

1 Patrice Ghirardi, who took the name Shankar, and was commonly known as *big Patrice*, had been a very active member of the Auroville community from 1975 to the early nineties. But I was right: he was a member of the Task Force, probably more as representing the opposition...

things have happened in practice. I had hopes that it would work out differently. I was also hoping that we would be able to do something better with the Residents Assembly. I was hoping that we would get always good secretaries and so on and so forth. It did not happen this way. But we don't know what would have happened otherwise.

Audience: *If quite everybody is unhappy about the practical functioning of the Residents Assembly, why don't you try to get an amendment or work on a new proposal to make this Auroville Act a little more precise, to make it better?*

Alain: Well, there are two things that I can say on this topic. Firstly, it would be extremely difficult to get the Auroville law amended and, assuming we would still try, we could run into the problem of other people than us taking the opportunity to try to introduce all sorts of amendments that we would not like to have. It could be a Pandora box. I feel that the problem is not so much the law, it is our capacity to organize ourselves, to come together. This is the real problem, to come together. And I always think, I really believe – I don't accuse anyone, I have just to look at myself – that if we were able to be really united about something, let's say about a certain vision of Auroville, I believe that then many things would become possible. The Governing Board itself would be compelled to acknowledge it.

Audience: *You would just have to work a bit on the functioning of your assembly to be able to do something that works.*

(Big noise, everyone talking at the same time)

Audience: *We did try!*

Audience: *You don't have many rules.*

Alain: It was the great merit of this law not to have too many rules, precisely to preserve spaces for liberty. The problem is that we are not able to use them much. We have to admit that, here, rules don't really work. What counts more is a certain spirit, and the spirit, you have it or you don't have it. It is not easy.

Audience: *One of the last things you said is that without this law, perhaps the small panchayats (local village governments) would be trying to control Auroville. This is a remark that struck me and I said to myself: Maybe this is the deeper reason why Mother allowed this war with the SAS to happen: to create a situation leading to a law which prevents this kind of things from happening and which protects Auroville.*

Alain: It is possible, I agree. In any case, I can recall something, the remark made by Mahajan when I asked him what he remembered of the whole story. He told me: "I now hardly remember anything, except that it was a miracle!" The three of us who were witnesses were like dumbfounded because it was a kind of absolute record: A bill which was not even drafted on August 20th was voted by both houses of Parliament on September 5th, and by a full unanimous Lok Sabha!! I must say that it is something inconceivable, and I don't think it has ever happened before and I don't know if it will happen in the future. Something happened then and there and one cannot but feel it very strongly. The other important point is that immediately afterwards, the political situation became such that nothing would have happened: in the next Parliament session, there were the first salvos of the Bofors scandal, which in fact marked the beginning of the end for Rajiv Gandhi, who was voted out in the elections of 1989. So we can say that it was the one and only possible moment. The Parliament was also not ready to renew again the temporary Auroville Act, so it was the sole window of opportunity, the only moment where it was yet possible. It is why Mahajan came to tell us that he could

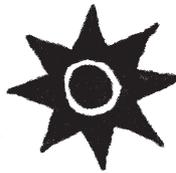
not sleep at night, because he knew that, after September 5th, after the end of the summer parliamentary session, it would be too late! I must admit that, when we were up there in Delhi, it did look like an impossible task: how could we hope? And yet it did happen. This is why no one can prevent me thinking that, at that time, there was an obvious manifestation of that Force which made that miracle happen.

Now, how we deal with it, how the Government deals with it, this is part of human history and I have nothing to say. Maybe I only have a regret that we could not do better. But then it is quite often like that. Things don't turn out as we hope and even one can imagine that it could have been worse.

Rod told me something recently, something like, "People don't realize, they go on complaining about Auroville but they don't realize that it could be much worse!"

And in fact I do feel there is something to that.

Applause



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