



Auroville International

UNITED KINGDOM

Special Newsletter – June 2008

This special newsletter has been put together at a very difficult time for Auroville. A short film appeared on the BBC's Newsnight programme, and subsequently on BBC World, and the soundtrack on Radio 4. The film concentrated solely on the abuse of children in the Auroville area, based on apparent "evidence" from several local people known to bear a grudge against the community. The film has the appearance of a deliberate campaign to discredit Auroville's internationally acclaimed work, and has deeply disturbed residents, and supporters from around the world. There have already been more than 100 letters of complaint to the BBC. We publish here Auroville's official statement, two of these letters and a personal letter sent to the editor of Newsnight.

Even though we believe the allegations against Aurovilians to be totally unfounded, the Auroville authorities are commissioning a full, independent investigation.

Official Statement from the Working Committee of Auroville

On May 21st, the BBC aired a nine-minute video on Auroville in its programme NEWSNIGHT.

The video focuses on allegations that some Aurovilians and Auroville guests engage in sexual activities with minor children from the surrounding villages and that Auroville does nothing about it.

The film is an outrageous piece of tabloid journalism, put together with the sole objective to produce a sensational story. The journalist has not verified the truth of the allegations which are unsubstantiated and unproven. Neither has the journalist checked the motives and credibility of the interviewees. They have since been identified as persons who have been asked to leave Auroville in the past, for reasons of misbehaviour, and therefore bear a grudge. The film is peppered with malicious innuendo in an attempt to show the truth of the allegations.

No opportunity has been given to any Auroville authority to refute the statements. Only after strong protests from both the Working Committee and Auroville International UK did the BBC agree to include a short interview with a member of the Working Committee. This interview was tagged on to the video and aired after it, and is therefore far less persuasive than if it would have been included within the film itself.

Auroville runs various schools for village children, which have been co-financed by both DFID and the European

Commission and as such have come under the scrutiny of a wide range of people during project evaluations, as well as the Education Department of the Govt. of Tamil Nadu and the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Govt. of India. If child abuse was happening as claimed in the video, it would have been investigated, given the high ethical and operational expectations they hold of Auroville.

Auroville has zero tolerance towards sexual activities with minors, and does not tolerate such behaviour from Aurovilians or Auroville guests. As soon as information about such activities comes to our notice, the matter is investigated and swift action is taken against the perpetrator who is made to leave Auroville, and the Indian authorities are informed.

Auroville cannot control what happens in the surrounding area. Many guest houses and private home-stays have come up in the villages and in Pondicherry, and we are not aware of what happens there. Auroville is in regular contact with the local police authorities, as there is a tendency to attribute any unpleasant happening within the area as being of Auroville's doing, or in some way connected with Auroville's presence in the area.

We are taking action against the BBC for showing this film and making these harmful statements.

The Working Committee, 23-05-2008

Dr. Karan Singh

Text of letter dated June 2, 2008 from Dr Karan Singh, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation to Mr Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC. Dr Karan Singh is a senior minister in the Indian parliament.

Dear Mr Thompson,

I write to you about a TV clip on Auroville, which was produced by one Rachel Wright for BBC and was broadcast as a part of 'NewsNight' programme on BBC 2 on May 21st 2008, and on BBC World on May 24th 2008.

The international cultural township of Auroville in South India is administered by the Auroville Foundation, an autonomous body set up under the Auroville Foundation Act, 1988, which is accountable to the Parliament of India through India's Ministry of Human Resource

Development. I am presently the Chairman of the Foundation's Governing Board constituted by the Government. I am enclosing, for your information, my brief biographical sketch.

I was gravely disturbed and distressed to see that the broadcast portrays Auroville as a place inhabited by an anarchic sect where paedophilia is rampant. By broadcasting a report containing unsubstantiated allegations of a heinous nature without cross-checking them either with the Auroville Foundation or Aurovilians, the BBC has damaged its long-standing credibility as a

media wedded to truth. I have been Chairman of the Governing Board once earlier. During my earlier and the present tenure as Chairman, I have frequently visited Auroville and have been closely involved in its activities and in constant touch with a wide cross-section of Aurovilians. Further, the Foundation's Secretary, a senior serving civil servant, has his headquarters within Auroville. If paedophilia were as widespread as alleged in your report, it could not have escaped our attention.

I gather that the Working Committee of Auroville Foundation's Residents' Assembly, a statutory body, is lodging a formal complaint with the BBC Trust. Therefore, without going into a detailed rebuttal, I will restrict my observations to certain salient points.

Auroville's founding is firmly anchored in the philosophy of human unity propounded by one of the outstanding spiritual thinkers of last century, Sri Aurobindo, and was given concrete shape 40 years back by his spiritual companion, the late Mirra Alfassa, who is universally venerated as 'The Mother'. Besides the Government of India, UNESCO unanimously welcomed and endorsed the founding of Auroville as a crucible of the experiment in human unity. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of its founding earlier this year, UNESCO reiterated its support to the Auroville Experiment through another unanimous resolution of its Executive Board. I am enclosing certain documents that will give you some idea of Auroville, its aims and objectives.

I am unhappy that your report on Auroville does not mention Sri Aurobindo at all and dismisses the Mother as "a French woman", and creates an impression that is exactly opposite of what we are striving to achieve through Auroville. The report keeps on harping on the instances of paedophilia alleged by certain individuals whose credentials your reporter does not establish nor does she challenge the credibility of their statements. You will appreciate that the first task of a seasoned journalist, when faced with odious allegations, is to cross

check them with appropriate sources before putting them out as gospel truth as she has done. I am told that Rachel Wright was a guest of Auroville community while she was filming there. It is all the more reprehensible on her part as a conscientious journalist of a responsible organisation like the BBC to have blithely abused the generosity of her hosts by keeping them totally in the dark and surreptitiously advancing her own agenda of maligning an institution that is considered unique in the world. When confronted later as to why she did not cross check the allegations with her hosts, she is reported to have said that she was advised against it and also felt 'vulnerable' because of the information, a defence that is specious and unacceptable. When confronted with gross inaccuracies in the report, as a last ditch attempt, the BBC has made an effort to insert a bit of praise about Auroville. But it is obviously so inconsistent with the entire trend of the report as to serve no purpose at all.

The Auroville cultural township has a population of around 1,900 adults and children drawn from 40 different countries including the UK. In a community with such a diversity of cultural backgrounds and a minimal of overseeing authority, the possibility of occasional deviant behaviour by one or two individuals cannot be ruled out. But those in Auroville's leadership position within the community and the Auroville Foundation's Governing Board are always alert about such unethical acts and have not failed to take prompt and effective action. Paedophilia is a crime under the Indian Penal Code. If it were as rampant as portrayed in your report, the local Police would have surely taken recourse to action under the law.

Instead of promoting the cause of human unity that Auroville represents and the world is in dire need of, I regret to say that the BBC has done great harm to Auroville's reputation. A suitable apology from you on behalf of the BBC is the least that we would expect.

With kind regards, Yours sincerely,

Karan Singh.

Auroville International Advisory Council

Protest against the content of Newsnight of May 21st 2008 on Auroville, Tamil Nadu, India. To Peter Barron, Editor of Newsnight.

The International Advisory Council is a group of eminent people from around the world, who advise Auroville and its Governing Board. Their members include Sir Mark Tully, internationally acclaimed journalist, and Dr Marc Luyckx Ghisi, previously advisor to two presidents of the European Commission.

Dear Mr. Barron,

We are the members of the International Advisory Council of Auroville, which is empowered under the Auroville Foundation Act to advise the Governing Board. At the same time we also advise Aurovilians and in particular the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly. We also help Auroville with its international relations and help the separate organization Auroville International to promote knowledge of the township and what it stands for. To do this we meet twice a year in Auroville and we usually spend considerable time there. In this way we have come to know Auroville, its institutions, the way it works, and its activities well. We have developed a particular admiration for Auroville's educational activities. Hence we feel compelled to protest

to you about the film you showed on May 21st in NewsNight and consequently on BBC World.

We know that Dr Karan Singh, the Chairman of Auroville's Governing Board, and one of India's longest serving and respected politicians, has written to the Director General about this film and that Auroville will be filing a formal complaint. We also know that you and the reporter, Rachel Wright, were made well aware of Auroville's views on the draft script and the version of the film before the final one. We will not therefore go into a detailed rebuttal of the film, but just make some salient points.

The description of Auroville contained many errors, and when the script was eventually sent to the Auroville

Working Committee for their comments, they were pointed out, but by no means all of them were corrected.

The description of Auroville in the film nowhere near does justice to the philosophy, which led to its foundation, the philosophy of one of the most revered Indian thinkers of the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo.

The Mother, his spiritual collaborator, was highly regarded by statesmen such as J. Nehru and Indira Gandhi. She is dismissed as “a French Woman”. Sri Aurobindo is not mentioned.

The magnificent meditation centre, known as the Matrimandir, which the Aurovilians built themselves, and which is widely acclaimed as an outstanding and original architectural achievement, is dismissed as “a giant gold sphere.”

The reporter talks of induction taking one year when it was pointed out to her that the year was a probationary period and there was no induction or initiation whatsoever.

The impression purposefully given and left with the viewer is, that Auroville is some peculiar sect, which is quite contrary to all it stands for.

The film also indicates that Auroville is anarchic. There is, as we have said, a Governing Body and an International Advisory Council. A senior Officer of the Indian Administrative Service of Joint Secretary level manages the office of the Auroville Foundation in Auroville. The Aurovilians themselves have a Resident's Assembly, a Working Committee, and several other bodies. The vigour with which the Auroville Working Committee has defended Auroville against your reporter's allegations is proof that Auroville's own institutions function effectively.

The film contains allegations against Auroville, which are not challenged in any way by the reporter. She simply accepts them as true. Her most important witness claims that he left Auroville, and that claim is not challenged. The Auroville records show that he was told to leave and had the reporter checked any of her facts with Auroville Outreach, the organization responsible for the township's relations with the press, she would have found details of the misdemeanours he committed. This was pointed out by the Working Committee when they read the script but still not reflected in the film transmitted.

In the film only one Aurovilian, Mr. Gilles Guigan, is given a chance to say something. He seems to have been a last minute inclusion after the lack of any Aurovilian interview in the film had been pointed out to the reporter by the Working Committee. Mr. Guigan's words have been crudely edited to make him appear to support the film, although the statement is so brief as to be almost meaningless. As we know Mr. Guigan well through his dedicated work in the construction of the unique meditation centre, we can't believe he intended to endorse the film. This was confirmed when we received a copy of

his objection to the BBC stating that he felt betrayed by Mrs. Wright to whom he talked for over 45 minutes.

Several of the allegations were beyond belief. One, which was removed when Auroville pointed out its absurdity, stated that one in five children in an Auroville School were being abused. This allegation was made by an anonymous villager who didn't explain his connection with the school or how he had obtained this information. The villager was still allowed to say that men came into the school and asked children to stay and have sex with them after school. This seems extraordinarily unlikely in a school most of whose staff are women and which has been approved by international donors who fund it. It is also inspected by the government of the State of Tamil Nadu . Another of your reporter's witnesses is a social worker. He is unidentified except by his name. Viewers are not told which

organization he works for or what his experience is. His allegations are generalisations and contain nothing specific. One victim does testify to having been abused by one Aurovilian but he does not appear to be a recent case although it is impossible to be sure about that because the journalism is so sloppy that no indication is given about when this occurred. .

Making a complaint to the BBC

If you wish to make a complaint to the BBC, please go to their web site www.bbc.co.uk/complaints, or write to:

*BBC Complaints, PO Box 1922,
Glasgow G2 3WT*

If you are not happy with their reply, please persist, as so far they have been sending standard replies to all complainants. If you have any comments to make to Auroville or AVI UK about the broadcast, please write to Martin, whose address is on the last page.

There is a deliberate attempt to imply that Auroville is in some way responsible for the unfortunate fact that the increasing popularity of the nearby town of Pondicherry as a tourist destination has attracted foreign paedophiles. In a piece to camera the reporter says she saw three men with boys on the beach. The innuendo implied is that all three men were paedophiles and all from Auroville. But there is nothing to back this up and none of the men are shown on film. To strengthen the innuendo the reporter speaks of Auroville or Auro beaches. But all beaches in India are public.

The original script sent to Auroville concluded with the statement by the reporter, “Auroville does not seem to be operating in the spirit in which it was founded.” In a last ditch attempt to make the film more balanced the conclusion was altered to include praise of Auroville, but it is so obviously inconsistent with the whole trend of the film as to serve no purpose.

The film will inevitably create damaging and unwarranted suspicion about Auroville. It has already severely damaged the BBC's reputation for fair and balanced journalism among all those who know and admire Auroville. We believe it is only fitting that the BBC finds some way of acknowledging that the film does not live up to those standards, and ensuring that it is not shown again.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Mark TULLY, Chairman, New Delhi
Ms Vishakha DESAI , New York , USA
Dr Michael MURPHY, San Francisco , USA
Dr Doudou DIENE, Paris
Dr Marc LUYCKX GHISI, Vice Chairman, Brussels

New Creation Bilingual School – a personal letter

The last letter we publish is one from Martin, our secretary, sent personally to the editor of Newsnight, Peter Barron, the day before the programme, after we had seen the rough script. It was an attempt to appeal to the humanity of those at the BBC, in the hope that they might actually care about the children concerned, and not just about the broadcasting of a sensational story.

Dear Mr Barron

I am leaving the official response to this film to my colleagues in Auroville, who have much more detailed information available to them. However, I feel that I should write to you personally.

I have been associated with Auroville for more than 25 years, first visiting in 1984, and have been working in a voluntary capacity supporting Auroville's work ever since, working for Auroville International UK, which is a registered charity. In that capacity and because of my personal interest in Auroville and its work, and my admiration for its achievements, I have been visiting Auroville for several weeks each year since that time, working for a number of Auroville projects mainly in education, village development and environmental regeneration. I now spend around 3 months in Auroville each year. Coming from a family of teachers, and having three children of my own, my main interest is in education, and have therefore taken a close interest in the education work of Auroville, and in particular the work of New Creation Bilingual School.

I first visited the school in 1985 when it was an unstructured attempt by a well meaning Aurovilian to give some basic education to the poorest children in the Auroville area - who would not otherwise have received an education at all. Since that time the school has grown, not only in size but in quality of education, until now it is a model, certainly for the region, but possibly for India as a whole, for the possibilities for educating the poorest village children. Any other school of a similar standard in the area will require the families to pay fees, which these families cannot afford. Not only that, but the school is now applying for a special status, as yet only acquired by expensive fee paying schools for wealthy children, which will improve the standard of education still further. Our aim is for that school to be a model for what is possible in the education of impoverished village children, giving them the same opportunities as those from wealthy families.

In 2005 I helped set up a support group for the school, whereby a group of concerned Aurovilians, both western and Tamil meet weekly for one afternoon (voluntarily), to care for the welfare, finances and education standards of the school - this is on top of their normal work in Auroville - and in addition to the full time staff of the school, half of whom are Aurovilians (by the way, the Aurovilian teachers, who are volunteers, actually receive less as their maintenance than the salary of the employed colleagues from outside). I am a member of that group when I visit. This is one of the most dedicated group of volunteers you could find anywhere, and care passionately about the children and the school.

Under their guidance and dedicated work the school has made even more improvements.

The picture that your film paints of New Creation School is about as far from the truth as is possible to be, and the idea that "one in five children are currently being abused" [a claim made in the original draft script] is frankly ludicrous and appalling. There is no way that with the care being given to these children and the dedication of the staff and support group, 40 children from that school are being regularly abused. If I thought just one child was being abused I would be appalled, and would demand immediate action.

My case to you, is that the picture that you are intending to portray of Auroville is frankly appalling and absurd. It in NO WAY reflects the reality of the place which I have been visiting for the last 24 years.

New Creation School relies for the majority of its funding on voluntary donations. The amount it receives from the Indian Government is very little indeed. A large part of this funding comes from the UK through private donors who have been touched by the dedicated work of the school. Several have visited and volunteered at the school. If the private donations to the school were to cease, then almost certainly the school would close, devastating the lives of more than 200 children who would have nowhere else to go to be educated. The publicity which your film would give is likely to have this effect. Do you want to take this responsibility?

Of course my colleagues and I care enormously about the welfare of all the children in the Auroville area. New Creation is only one of around 9 schools being run for deprived children in the area, all being run with equal dedication, and many achieving amazing results - does this sound like exploitation? Those I have spoken to about these accusations take them very seriously indeed, and will, I know, make every effort to make sure that they are thoroughly investigated and vigorously acted upon. We from the UK will make sure that this is done and that we are fully satisfied.

In one sense we must be grateful to Rachel Wright for highlighting this issue, as it forces us to ensure that a thorough investigation is undertaken and that any abuse which might exist (which we still believe comes from outside the community) is stamped out. But the broadcast of such a grossly distorted view of Auroville's work is frankly atrocious, and I appeal to you even now, to reconsider this broadcast. I repeat: we care only for the children and their welfare. Do you?

Best wishes,

Martin

Address:

For all correspondence please write to our Secretary, Martin Littlewood, whose address is:

30 The Green, Surlingham, Norwich, Norfolk, NR14 7AG

Tel. 01508 538300, E mail: info@aviuk.org