

What's news?

In the 'ordinary' world it's obvious, isn't it? 'News' is anything which has publicity value: disasters, wars, politics, a cure for cancer, what the famous are doing or thinking, major sporting achievements or a clairvoyant octopus.

But what about Auroville? What should we be reporting on here? Well, when we initiated Auroville Today way back in 1988 on behalf of the Auroville International Centres the answer was clear. By 'news' the Centres meant information about things like new and ongoing projects, Auroville's economy and governance system and the lives of individual Aurovilians. On the whole, I think Auroville Today has done a decent job here. And these are areas we should continue to feature. But three months of enforced rest have made me wonder if these are the only areas we should be covering... and when we do cover some topics, if we are always doing it in the right way.

Take one of the 'hot' items of the past few months – the controversy regarding the construction of benches underneath the Banyan at the centre of Auroville. We haven't covered this yet, partly because our tendency has been to allow hot topics to cool a little before we offer our reflections upon them. Nevertheless, our usual approach in cases like this would be to present the arguments from both sides while charting the progress of the controversy. But would this do justice to what is really going on? For it's clear that with a topic like this we are dealing with familiar battle-lines: the benches around the Banyan are just the latest episode in a long-running saga where what is often perceived to be 'imposed authority' is pitted against 'the will of the people'.

This, of course, is a crass oversimplification; apart from anything else, such controversies are also fuelled by petty power games and personal resentments. But it seems particularly important in a place like Auroville, where we try to understand the larger dimensions of our daily lives, that journalists practise using the wide-angle as well as the telephoto lens.

There's another area where I think Aurovillian journalists have a special responsibility. Often when we report upon controversies we simply repeat what the main protagonists are saying. But generally we don't examine how they arrive at these opinions and why they hold them so vociferously.

Most individuals caught up in disputes like the one concerning the Banyan believe they hold truths which are self-evident. "Roger designed these benches and he got his mandate from Mother", "The Mother would never have approved a design which threatens the health of the Banyan," and so on. But it is unlikely that all parties to these disputes received a blinding flash of insight direct from the Supreme. It's much more likely that individuals take positions on the basis of gut reactions, or because of the preferences or dislikes of friends, or because they feel deference to or dislike of an authority figure. None of these would qualify as freely-chosen, conscious choices. Many of them, like attitudes to authority, may have their roots in childhood experiences or in a particular cultural milieu.

No one, of course, ever admits this possibility publicly and, probably, not even to themselves. Perhaps many people are unaware of the roots of their own behaviour. But if, as Mother pointed out, the first condition of being a 'True Aurovillian' is to become aware that one is much more than the sum of one's cultural, racial and genetic inheritance, then any attempt, however modest, to recognise and lay aside these temporal trappings so that something truer can emerge should be celebrated as something very special.

Now, wouldn't this be news worthy of Auroville?

Alan

Safety and peace: at what price?

After the murder of a gang member from Kuilapalayam on May 24th and following the security problems that it created, about 100 people attended a meeting called by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and the Working Committee to discuss ways in which security could be improved. The district Collector and the Superintendent of Police (SP) were also present.

Immediately after the murder, business units and a school in Kuilapalayam were forced to close for over four days as bands of young men terrorized people in Auroville and the village. Some business units were asked for money. Streets were abandoned in fear of further escalation of violence and the level of anxiety was high. The Support Group of the Auroville Board of Commerce, in an open letter to the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation and others, expressed their concern about the deteriorating law and order situation which affected the life and work of Aurovilians and their employees. The Support Group felt it not acceptable that these days had passed without any enforcement of law and order. It requested that, in view of the special status and significance of Auroville as an international project as well as the Auroville Foundation being directly supported by the Central Government, local authorities and the Secretary, Auroville Foundation deal effectively with such problems.

When the police found out about the murder and

anti-social activities they immediately took stern measures. The police arrested those involved and filed charges under the Goonda Act. Also a few Aurovilians were arrested. The police also strengthened their presence in the area for a couple of weeks. But the sight of police armed with AK47 rifles was uncomfortable.

In the meeting the question was raised if the arrested Aurovilians had not been framed, as they were not believed to be involved in gang activities. Pending the investigation, the SP was restricted to how much he could share. He warned that the people who are guilty will be going to jail for a long time. The SP was asked to release photographs of the accused so that people in Auroville will be aware who they are.

"We met separately with the Tamil Aurovilians," said the Secretary. "I made it clear to them that I know who they are and who they are related to. I also made it clear that they must make a choice; either they are first Aurovillian and they cut all ties to family members that are involved in gangs; or, if their choice is to remain loyal to their family or relations, then I want them out of Auroville. They should renounce their Aurovillian status and leave. The choice is up to them."

At this point the Secretary mentioned that there are plans to install a series of check-points at the entrances to Auroville to be staffed by the police. "Their physical presence will ensure a quick response to a crime scene." The Secretary explained that he would like to "tighten the comings and goings of out-

siders. The site for the Certitude post is now being cleared and soon we will begin constructing a building. We want to restore peace and tranquillity and police in the area will help create that feeling. We take this very seriously and we want to implement the plan immediately. The reality of the situation is Auroville is becoming a tourist destination bringing more people and increasing the risk of criminal activities." The police at the check-post would also deal with distress calls.

This brought up a series of concerns and questions like "What kind of powers do these officers have to restrict freedom of movement? Will they have the authority to stop anyone and what kind of enforcement is there?" The response was, "If their behaviour is anti-social, criminal or suspicious we will stop them and if needed arrest them whether they are Aurovillian or non-Aurovillian. Being in Auroville allows us to take immediate action," said the SP. Also the need to issue identification cards to members of Auroville was mentioned.

A special topic of discussion was how Auroville businesses should respond to being bullied for money. The SP advised that they send a complaint with the names of those attempting to extort money, and the police will take immediate action.

The Mother said back in 1966 that security in Auroville should be ensured by "a battalion of guards made of athletes and gymnasts." Sadly, this may not come to fruition any time soon.

Elaine

Breaking the silence

The Women's Safety Task Force (WSTF) was founded in May 2009 under the umbrella of the Auroville Health Services (AVHS). As Alice, one of the founders, pointed out "health and safety is a public health issue, therefore we need to address this subject." Women are increasingly becoming the target of sexual assault and harassment in and around Auroville and we "want to break the silence and provide a safe space for women to be heard and supported. It is important to report the crime but when women have been assaulted they generally feel more comfortable reporting and receiving support from other women.

"Early in 2009 a woman walked into AVHS very upset about a sexual assault that occurred to her while she was driving her moped. When we started to look into this, it became clear there were some programs and services missing in Auroville. We needed to make people aware that groping and sexual assault were happening at an alarming rate. WSTF wants to break the silence and put the issue out in the open. Women should not feel ashamed and blame themselves for the crime. Sexual assault is a crime punish-

able by a jail term. Women don't have to tolerate abusive sexual contact. If someone touches inappropriately, action should be taken against the perpetrator."

"The reason I was interested in becoming a member," said Rani, "is for as long as I have been living in Auroville, there have been incidents of violence on the roads. They have been met with silence. Victims often did not want to tell others about what happened to them because of trauma or shame. The issues were not discussed openly in the community nor were measures taken to help prevent them. I find this very frustrating". When the WSTF met with some of the working groups, "promises were made to install lights in the high risk areas and undertake other safety measures. These were agreements made over a year and half ago and we're still waiting."

The WSTF is growing in strength and membership. However, the Task Force is only a short term initiative to bring about change and improvement for the betterment of the community. WSTF wants to make people aware of the assaults through awareness programmes; identify and inform people about the types of violence taking place; implement preventative measures and inform about the risk factors: iden-

tify areas where there are repeated incidents: and dispel myths about why and how these acts take place.

The process is evolving. The group is addressing all issues around sexual assault. They have a 24/7 hotline, which is answered by a woman, and a website that informs people about where someone can go and report an incident. It's also a place to share ideas, read articles about the subject and pick up some safety tips. They are preparing another awareness campaign for Auroville that will include circulating an information sheet about the services to all the guest houses with contact numbers. The WSTF have collaborated with other women's groups including the Centre for Woman's Studies in Pondicherry and the Women Lawyer's Collective based in Bangalore.

Presently, AVHS are raising funds to purchase a vehicle that will be used for transporting women and seniors. They are trying to raise 9 lakhs.

For more information visit the website www.avtravelsafe.com

Elaine

P.S. During the last ten days of July four women were assaulted on Auroville roads, in some cases with violence.

Passings



Michael Mason

On April 20th early morning, Michael Mason of Samridhhi passed away at the age of 56 after suffering from a tumor in the brain for more than a year. Michael, originally from U.K., came to Auroville in 1977 and was one of the pioneer greenbelters. He planted and then for many years looked after a large forest area in Samridhhi with great dedication.

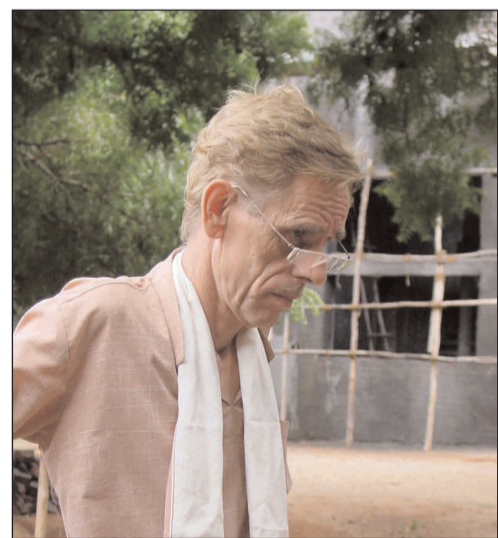
In his final months, many Aurovilians came together to care for him. As Biggie describes it, "Your need for us became a gift for us. Old and young from such different backgrounds, from such different nations formed a touching link and network of love. In fact, you made us manifest here in your forest home our dream of Auroville, the dream of Human Unity, that dream for which you stayed here from the day we met for the first time, some 32 years ago." His body was buried at Samridhhi forest.



S. Vengadesh

On April 28th, S.Vengadesh, an Aurovillian from India since 1992, passed away in Arka, at the young age of 39. After taking care of Atithi Griha guesthouse for years, Vengadesh had the opportunity to join the British Navy and left for U.K. in 2006, together with his wife Banumathi and their daughters Priyadurga and Jayashree. [see AVToday # 211, Sept. 2006].

Nearly two years ago he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and even though he had the best treatment on offer, it became apparent that it was terminal. Vengadesh and Banumathi travelled back to Auroville to meet with family and friends for the last time. Vengadesh's body was cremated on May 2nd. The Royal Naval attaché connected to the British High Commission in Chennai attended the ceremony and Veni's friends in the Royal Navy sent their warm appreciation of a "true friend and a very good worker".



Lloyd

On May 15th Lloyd (Luit Hofman) an Aurovillian since 1988, departed at the Health Centre at the age of 58. Lloyd, who came from The Netherlands, was diagnosed with cancer at the beginning of this year, which he faced courageously and with dignity when it became clear that it was terminal. His body was cremated on 20 April.

Lloyd loved literature. In 2007 he compiled an extensive anthology of poems by devotees of Sri Aurobindo. He also wrote poetry, collected in two books.

My aim was a few words to deal with knowing but light in coming across a small land fit for any use a small body of speech to be true to itself.