

A Brief (Political) History of AV Planning and Development

Part I - Overview

“...We can only heal what we are willing to feel. And, despite our rhetoric, we only change when it is unbearable to stay as we are.” from *A Trust for the Earth*

How can the resident community evolve an appropriate decision-making system if it has no real understanding of its own history that led to the present dysfunction? For as the Spanish philosopher/novelist George Santayana reminds us: Those who do not know their own past are doomed to repeat it.

The following is a personal attempt to share critical events in AV’s emergence that I believe still contribute to the present state of stagnation and structural arthritis. They are of course my “take” on these events. But they are based on first-hand experience and professional skills as a writer/archivist trained in “process-working” through conflict.¹ (See footnote below.) I understand some may differ with my interpretation of these events, but none can deny they occurred. Why bring up such unpleasant memories? some may ask. My answer: Forgetting is not a solution. Our shadows will only leave us when we heal them in the light. In this light, please do not read this as criticism but as critical analysis.

Era I: When the Mother was still present

The AV community pioneered through a difficult but honest emergence, responding to real needs, learning cooperation, sharing resources, building mutual trust, relying on common-sense goals, designing common-sense strategies, working hard with the means available. Settlements emerged; land was tended, farms and reforestation begun; first schools established; MM digging and construction initiated, serving as a unifying focal point for collective cohesion. Regular meetings between the settlements organically emerged to coordinate information, share ideas, discuss needs, priorities and ways to help one another in this era of no intra-community monetary exchange. (FYI, during my 21-year residency, I never received any salary or maintenance, only support in kind, at first through the Mother’s Ashram Prosperity system, later through the original shared economy of AV’s Pour Tous system.)

¹Credentials relevant to this exercise: Accepted into AV by the Mother who gave me my name and liaison work. During my 21-year AV residency (1969-1990), I helped establish the initial organization, internal communication system and outreach; helped birth the afforestation program; taught in the first schools; was among the first “diggers”/workers at Matrimandir; organized the 1988 “PeaceTrees” Soviet-America-India Youth Exchange; and wrote the first (and only PR-free) comprehensive AV documentation study (published in 1974): a 102-page booklet -- “Auroville - the first six years: 1968-1974” -- prompted by my personal relationship with anthropologist Margaret Mead. It tracked the community’s lines of development through text, photos and drawings, including the first population graph, nationality and age survey (broken down by settlements). Three thousand copies were printed, quickly selling out. I personally gave away dozens to AV residents and working groups over the decades. Yet sadly no one can locate any of them today.

Era II: After the Mother's Passing Nov. 17, 1973

The fledgling community was profoundly shaken by the Mother's passing, experiencing the shock of an orphaned child. We pulled ourselves together, supported one another, and soldiered on as best we could. But without Her physical presence and protection, shadows came out of the closet to fill the vacuum, asserting themselves in this most vulnerable period for an orphaned collective: A period when the community genuinely needed love, compassion and reassurance from its elders, not step-fathers callously trying to take control in Her name.

It would be too lengthy in Part I to pursue a detailed inquiry into these imposing forces and the influence they exerted on the future development of the collective child. In this light, I will simply list them below along with later interventions that I believe also played a major role in shaping the collective's destiny. Follow-up Parts II-V will attempt a deeper inquiry into each one individually, while Part VI concludes with a Proposal.

I confess in advance that my inquiry is colored by my personal subjective first-hand experience. But who among us can presume to give an "objective" account? Especially since most of you never lived through these developmental stages and can only rely on second-hand opinions, hear-say or B-class players pretending to know things they don't.

In this sense, this inquiry, while imperfect, at least offers a structural history of a process that remains mostly mythical, invisible, buried or covered up under sanitized PR. Yet without this larger historical overview, which I believe helps one understand how things devolved to where they are, how can the present collective heal past wounds or devise a more intelligent, creative and original decisionmaking process in the present?

The following represents actors who played influential roles in determining AV's direction after the passing of the Mother. As noted above, each will be developed in separate follow-up Parts to this initial overview posting:

1. The Sri Aurobindo Society's Attempted Takeover of Auroville by Force and Violence
2. The Intervention of Satprem / The Emergence of the Neutrals
3. The Hierarchic Imposition of Roger's Galaxy Masterplan
4. The Intervention of the Indian Gov't. and the Act of Parliament which de facto/de jure placed Auroville within a legal, governmental and bureaucratic framework
5. Concluding Proposal: Giving Yourselves Permission for a New Beginning

Part II - The Sri Aurobindo Society's Attempted Takeover of Auroville by Force and Violence

Following the Mother's passing in November 1973, realities shifted dramatically. AV had no legal status of its own, existing at that time as a project under the umbrella of the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS). So long as the Mother was President and overseer of the SAS, this was no problem. But with Her passing, Navajata arrogated himself to President, then re-established himself as "Chairman".

Since AV had no legal status independent from the SAS, this allowed the SAS to claim AV as its property. It also gave the SAS complete control over bank accounts and visa guarantees, no longer needing to refer such decisions to the Mother. In 1974, the SAS chose to run AV as "their" project, according to "their" priorities, creating tensions between the SAS and AV residents.

This arbitrary usurpation of power, following a classic top-down patriarchal model of governance that excluded AV residents from any voice in their own decisionmaking, led to the escalating conflicts which followed. For here was an outside body, the SAS, effectively over-riding the resident body's organically-evolving decisionmaking structures, systems, priorities and learning experiences. E.g., if residents prioritized tree-planting and the SAS wanted offices and PR material to promote "their" AV project, then the SAS would allocate money to offices and PR rather than trees. They could do this because they controlled the bank accounts, even though the money in those accounts was donated to Auroville.

In practical terms, this illustrates the initial source of conflict between the SAS and AV residents following the Mother's passing: They controlled the money, "owned" the land; they could fund what they pleased. And when residents began to revolt, standing up for their own experience, priorities and emerging internal organization; and when some even dared to establish a legitimate legal status to protect the resident community, registering an "Auroville Resident's Association" (ARA), the SAS responded with escalating force to quell the rebellion: first filing a court injunction against the ARA, then cutting off funding and threatening "foreigners" with visa cancellation/expulsion; then finally unleashing violence on the residents, especially those deemed to be chief "trouble-makers."

When I say unleashing violence, I mean real mafia-style violence: hiring village goondas to beat up "foreigners" (including women, for I even drove a Dutch lady from Forecomers to JIPMER after she was beaten and required stitches); giving permission to villagers to harvest the crops grown by AV residents (since the SAS held the land deeds); poisoning the well between villagers and "foreign" residents; bribing police to arrest AV trouble-makers as trespassers on "their" property; enflaming the violence by bussing in RSS storm-troopers (who brutally beat Frederick in Bharat Nivas with lathis, leaving him lying there until he was found and ambulanced to JIPMER); eventually expelling two "foreign" residents as examples, injecting fear into the orphaned collective child who could no longer trust the very elders who were supposed to protect and support her.

Without indulging in further gruesome details, I can assure you this and more actually happened. Because it was documented in published text with photographs to prove it. (Which is why the Government intervened.) I speak from personal experience, for I was not only a first-hand witness to such events but a victim. For I too was arrested, beaten, jailed and expelled as one of the two foreigners used as examples that the SAS meant business. Though it is painful to revisit such shocking periods in AV history, the denial and cover-up of these events makes it impossible to heal a past most of you never knew existed (or some of you desperately wanted to forget). It also avoids accountability. For how many of you have ever heard an individual or group (then or now) publicly apologize for decisions or behaviors that misguided AV or violated its residents?

In light of what occurred during this troubling period between 1974-1977, can you see how such physical and psychological abuse damaged the emerging collective child, injecting division and fear into the community, turning Indian against “foreigner”, North Indian against Tamil? And can you also see how it broke trust, brutalizing the embryonic home-grown organization/community that was emerging then, leading to waves of residents (mostly from the USA) emigrating back to their former countries?

Part III - The Intervention of Satprem / The Emergence of the Neutrals

During the course of this conflict, Satprem entered the arena, supporting the resident community’s right to be free from such oppression and aggression. What follows is my interpretation of the role he played. I am indeed treading into sensitive subject matter. But it is extremely relevant in order to offer a more complete background to the complex realities and tensions that still vibrate in AV today under the surface.

As context: In the beginning of the conflict with the SAS, AV residents did not express a wish to be separate from the SAS. They just wanted a seat at the decision-making table, a voice in priorities and decisions that affected on-the-ground development. It was only when the SAS denied this legitimate request that AV residents found themselves in an either-or choice: Either side with the SAS or struggle for independence. There was however, as this section will develop, an in-between group that came to be called “the Neutrals”, declaring that they didn’t want to choose “sides”.

With this background...

I believe Satprem’s intervention initially served as a positive support for a community under attack for simply seeking its right to be. For example, he proposed a coordinating body for AV residents called the “Auroville Cooperative” to provide a coherent center for day-to-day functioning in the midst of the turmoil. He also proposed an alternative economy called “the Envelope System” based on something the Mother practiced. In this system, funds were allocated according to priorities, and were placed in envelopes specifically designated for the purpose the funds were given. In other words, funds designated for a specific use could not be taken out, mixed up and used for another use.

These 2 suggestions from Satprem were in fact adopted by the resident community, both serving useful roles at that time. They also meshed well with the Pour Tous economy/ food-sharing arrangement emerging then (thanks to Clare, Alain & Christine, Jocelyn Elder et al).

The negative side of Satprem's role, as I saw it, emerged in terms of the influence he exerted over those who over-zealously followed him, taking his words to extremes that led to further internal divisions and violence. For it seemed as if the conflict between the SAS and AV community was getting mixed into the conflict between the Ashram Trustees and Satprem's publication of "Mother's Agenda". At this point, whether intentional or not, Satprem's rhetoric became divisive, feeding into an extremism and intolerance that created further fractures in the community (inciting harassment and persecution of those who chose to remain Neutral).

Looking back on that terribly conflicted period of the late 1970s, I too felt uncomfortable with Neutrals "fraternizing" with SAS members while the SAS was terrorizing AV residents and making a mockery of everything Auroville stood for. But at the same time, I could not condone the escalating intimidation of Neutral residents, the "book-burning" incident in Aspiration, or the mistreatment of innocent newcomers who got caught in the cross-fire. (In fact, I even wrote to Satprem at this time, expressing my concern for such aggressive behavior. But he never read the letter, returning it to me unopened through his emissary.)

This section could easily be developed into a much deeper inquiry. For I believe the wounds from this intra-community breach have never consciously healed, leaving an unspoken division beneath the bandaid. (Which I believe flared up again during the Sraddhalu Inquisition of Peter Heehs that broke open in late-2008 along similar fracture lines that shared striking parallels). In any case, the point here is that AV residents were not only being attacked from without by the SAS, but were also dealing with the contagion of this division within the community. In this light, can we understand how confused and insecure residents felt?

So is it any wonder that such a collective child, betrayed by those it trusted, attacked by those who should have been its protectors, has a hard time believing in itself now?... has lost the will to stand up for itself against authority?... and as a consequence, has lost the ability to decide for itself (as future sections attempt to develop)?...

Part IV - The Hierarchic Imposition of Roger's Galaxy Masterplan

With AV residents vulnerable, exhausted from the protracted conflict with the SAS, traumatized by the violence, polarized by fanatical behavior from elements within the community itself, the collective was in sheer survival mode. In this depleted state, the thought of another fight with Roger over the superimposition of the Galaxy Masterplan was doomed to fail. For even though some felt Roger's imperial top-down approach to planning contradicted the very meaning of Auroville as an evolutionary experiment; and though others felt his autocratic working style resembled the SAS, excluding residents

from participating in the process of their own design and development, there simply was no collective will left to stand up to him and his loyal Auro-Future ideologues who blindly defended The Galaxy as The Divinely Chosen Plan.

For as those of us there at the time remember, any attempt to question The Plan or suggest modifications that corresponded to reality, landscape or inhabitants, was immediately dismissed as heresy, blasphemy, or worse: In other words, those who questioned were labeled persons of badwill, against the Mother's approved Vision. In this light, with the collective completely worn down, the resident body went along with The Program. Of course, there were still evolutionaries banging on the door. But we were ignored. For Auro-Future knew that no one was going to storm their Bastille.

In a way, this sealed the collective's fate, tying it to a Galaxy that was growing more and more out of touch with the Earth, with present time, local Culture, natural environment, and the evolution of planning (replacing research-based decisions with ideology-driven commands). And as a result, it further reinforced the dis-empowerment of a community from its own decisionmaking process, de facto training and conditioning the resident body to stop thinking for itself and just go along with the dominant paradigm/power-structure.

After all, when you are constantly told No! No! No!, at a certain point, you stop believing in yourself, you just give up and give in. Which, I believe, is why people finally withdrew into their own backyards, sticking with their circle of social friends rather than working to build a healthy vibrant collective process that empowered creative thinking. Because every attempt to do so was smashed by patriarchal control freaks and their bullies.

Exploring this issue from another angle, consider the following reflections on Auro-Future planning and planners: We started the first school in a keet shed in Aspiration while Roger was building his Last School building down the plateau. When Last School was completed in October of 1971, it was certainly an impressive architectural sculpture. But it failed as a school building. Especially in a South Indian climate and landscape. For the polyester roof elements leaked buckets in the monsoon and disintegrated under the tropical sun. And the interior was like an echo chamber, making it impossible to actually teach classes inside the beautiful curved spaces. Apparently, it never occurred to the Chief Architect to get practical input from teachers on the design of a school.

In this same spirit of analytical inquiry, what planner plans a city without acquiring the land or at least the most critical portions before starting construction? And what planner does not open up dialogue with local village leaders and landowners to enter into a joint planning process with AV residents for a commonly-shared plateau/ecosystem? For as a result of Auro-Future preoccupying itself with maquettes and architectural drawings imported from Paris rather than such obvious local planning priorities, AV residents are now left with the consequences. For just imagine if planners had prioritized land over models. Especially since a few of us back then begged and pleaded with the SAS and Auro-Future to buy the land when it was still affordable (100-200 Rs./acre).

In retrospect, here are some other things to consider: By keeping the entire “city area” vacant, restricting settlements to the periphery, AV grew from around the fringes, leaving the planned township area a virtual “dead-zone” for decades. Such an approach is contrary to the natural growth of embryos or cities. And it could only work, it seemed, if the planned City was built quickly by an outsider contractor rather than consciously in rhythm with its residents. For look at the result: Rather than bringing residents together and working from the centre outward, residents were separated from one another into isolated communities spread out over enormous distances while leaving the central area mostly blank and uninhabited?

In this light, can we see how such an approach to growth actually contributed to the problem of bringing people and consciousness together into a working collaborative synergy? in building inter-relations between parts and wholes? in forging a living human unity around a living center/plaza/meeting space? as well as to wasting enormous amounts of fossil fuel to get from point A to B (e.g., from Kottakarai to Pour Tous in Aspiration)? And how much safer/more secure would residents feel if they were clustered closer together in walking-distance neighborhoods? And with much of the “City” area uninhabited, can we blame villagers for encroaching on AV land that was de facto abandoned for decades? Why not at least fill in some of that open space usefully with something like solar-collector farms?...

Parting comment on Auro-Future planning: Consider the concept of an International Zone in today’s reality. Not only has the IZ also been kept blank awaiting the future Pavilions of Culture, but are such constructions even relevant in today’s world? For when the IZ was conceived, there was no internet, and only the rich jetted around to distant cultures. So in that era, an International Zone to experience the diversity and uniqueness of Cultures together in the unity of a common area made sense.

But do you think the Mother would have rigidly clung to that idea today?...when so many are traveling everywhere, and anyone can take a virtual tour of the Louvre? or Skype a video-chat across the globe? or go to a French, Italian, Indian, Mexican or Thai restaurant in their own town? or watch a Shakespeare Play in hi-def in their own living room? etc. And with the pressing urgencies of the present world, is the creation of static expensive concrete Pavilions a wise use of resources and funding? Or might one come up with a more creative way to explore the essential meaning of the IZ through dynamic cultural exchange programs, interactive dialogue, etc.?

In any case, just look at Bharat Nivas, India’s Pavilion built in the 1970s yet still unfinished today: Can anyone really say it has succeeded to evoke the Soul of India or to represent the diverse cultures of its States?

In this light, the rigid approach to a Galaxy Masterplan as sacrosanct forever, effectively stuck in time, contradicts the very meaning of evolution and the adaptation of plans to living realities. And as such, it not only deprived residents of the right to participate in their own evolution, but left you with the fundamental dilemma of large pieces of missing land in a divided landscape with a dangerously-depleted water table.

Part V - The Intervention of the Indian Gov't. and the AV Foundation Act

Finally, having suffered through the abuse of the SAS, the chiaroscuro of Satprem, and the domination of the Galaxy Mind, we come to: The Intervention of the Indian Gov't. and the Act of Parliament which de facto/de jure placed Auroville within a legal, governmental and bureaucratic framework.

It is understandable that the Gov't. of India (GOI) had to intervene. Especially after all the conflict and violence that finally led to a Supreme Court Case which de-linked AV from the SAS and their false claims that AV was part of their religion. (BTW, I am very familiar with the Supreme Court case as I spent a year in New Delhi working with our lawyers then. In fact, I drafted the Affidavit from which Fali Nariman, our senior advocate, successfully argued and won Auroville's case against the SAS. Sanjeev and Frederick can confirm this. Krishna Tewari later collected that Affidavit from me for the Archives.)

In this context, the 1988 AV Foundation Act was a consequence of the 1982 Supreme Court Judgement. For once the Court divested the SAS of its claim to Auroville, the GOI had to create a legal vessel in which to reinvest it. Hence, the Foundation.

While the Act certainly rescued AV residents from the immediate insecurity, instability and abuse that followed the Mother's passing, it brought mixed blessings. For with best intentions, the Act also superimposed a formula for internal decisionmaking, creating ambiguous structures such as the Working Committee (WC) and Residents Assembly (RA). After all, was the WC a decisionmaking body or a coordinating body? Did it represent the community to the Governing Board (GB)? Or did it represent the GB to the community? Or...? And was the RA a representative parliament or an ad hoc assembly comprised of whoever turned up at the meeting on a given day?...

At the time the Act was being drafted in New Delhi, I personally believed it should have been created along the lines of a Trust. In other words, honoring the spirit of Auroville's Charter and the principle of no private property, land and assets should be vested in the AV Foundation and held in Trust by GOI-appointed Trustees on behalf of Auroville. In this Trust-based proposal, all internal decisionmaking structures would be left to the resident community. And the GOI would only intervene in AV internal affairs and decisions if the resident body proved incapable of responsible self-governance. For if the community was given a chance to design its own organization as well as a collective process to ratify macro-level decisions, it would have for once felt entrusted, empowered and invested in its own creation rather than struggling once again to live out someone else's idea.

I realize this proposal may well be too unrealistic and idealistic. And that AV residents back then may not have been able to agree upon a common governing structure. But we can certainly see that the governing formula under the present Act has not proven to be very successful either. For just look at the struggles after a year to elect or select a coherent WC. And the RA formula has certainly not performed as anyone hoped or intended either. In fact, as a result, the AV Community in many respects has come to depend upon the GOI via the Governing Board and Secretary for its own continuity, stability and sustainability.

For if the GOI, GB and Secretary were not there to assure basic funding and provide basic bureaucratic structure, where would AV be today? In this light, the AV resident community in many ways operates like a social-welfare program of the GOI. Which I do not believe was either the intention of the Act or the Mother's Experiment. And where is the spirit of "a youth that never ages"? For surely AV was not meant to become a "spiritual" retirement community withdrawn from the world's evolutionary struggles and challenges.

Part VI - Concluding Proposal: Giving Yourselves Permission for a New Beginning

"Only those who have resolved to stay in Auroville for good have the right to intervene in its organization." ~The Mother, January 22, 1971

In fairness to the AV Community, it is impossible to blame residents for all that has happened. For as stated at the outset of this inquiry, I believe the community has been a victim of collective child abuse through much of its passage since the Mother's passing. From this perspective, it is understandable that after decades of disempowerment, AV residents simply lost the will and skill to think for themselves, chart their own course, design their own destiny. After all, you can only go on for so long being forced to conform to pre-ordained Galaxy roads, MM Gardens, Banyan Tree benches or (fill in your own galactic edict/imposition), before you finally give up and give in.

So here we are. Present time on Planet Earth as she goes through her intense labor pains to deliver, one hopes, a more conscious future humanity. And what exactly is Auroville's role, if any, at this critical turning-point moment for the planet?

For if you continue to fiddle your way forward, acting as if you have forever and that the Grace will somehow save you from yourselves; and if you continue to run on a money-driven economy (relying on Big Daddy to keep you afloat) rather than a shared economy that brings people together and integrates farms and families in a sustainable life; and if you go on playing by someone else's rules, beating your head against the wall just to elect or select a WC, I'm not sure the AV resident community has much to offer a world on the verge of economic and ecological collapse. (This does not deny that there are many sincere individuals and noteworthy projects in AV. It refers to the fact that AV was meant to be a model for an *integrated collective*, not simply a collection of people and projects.)

In this light, have you ever considered making a collective exercise to redesign a completely new, fresh and original organization, planning and decisionmaking structure, rather than just sheepishly following someone else's formula? E.g., evolving an organization in which town-planning is integrated *into* the collective decisionmaking structure rather than operating on a separate insulated track of its own. (For what kind of whole-system model for community decisionmaking disconnects planning from the rest of the collective process?) In other words, is it too late to give yourselves a second chance? -- to give yourselves permission to look at everything anew, starting from a clean page?

For if you weren't working from someone else's script, what would **you** write? What kind of organization would **you** create today if this was the first moment of the rest of your life? And if some of you were willing to try this experiment rather than just go on applying CPR to a system that doesn't work, why not consider reversing your whole approach? In other words, instead of trying to select/elect the "wisest" in the hopes that they will lead you to the light, why not focalize a collective process to:

1.) clearly define your needs in order of highest priorities; 2.) create an organization/ planning structure that corresponds to these collectively agreed-upon needs; 3.) find appropriate people with appropriate skills and professional credentials to fill these bodies rather than just electing or selecting people based on general "likes" or the fickle winds of popular approval? (Which doesn't seem to work anyway.)

And don't be ashamed to invite in collaborative consultants/advisors with professional research expertise, "taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within". For there is an incredible amount of practical knowledge, leading-edge information and experience available in the world outside your AV village limits.

A final suggestion: If you choose to explore such a visioning exercise, let go of all the things that others have imposed on you from Masterplans to Acts. Just give yourselves a chance to be free and think freely. In other words, give yourselves permission to rediscover who you are: Give yourselves permission to open up and **imagine**... letting a new wave come through, washing out all the old thoughts and formations, evoking a new creative synergy within the community, engaging in a new healthy inter-relationship with the world and with yourselves.

As a realist, I recognize at this point that AV system entropy may have set in -- that conditioned thinking and behavior may simply be too entrenched for such an attempt to succeed. But in the spirit of *Nishkama Karma*, you have nothing to lose by trying, even if the effort fails. For if you simply let things go on as they are, failing to reclaim the pioneering spirit of "a youth that never ages", others on the planet will receive Her inner signal and pick up the torch to build The Dream. In fact, as I see it, they/we already are.

For though She said that Auroville will be, it may well emerge globally through a network of instruments and processes -- of people and organizations who courageously rise up and humbly collaborate to proactively realize the inner meaning of Auroville wherever they are on this planet we share. After all, the Divine is not rigid, fixed or bound by any rules. The Shakti is ever-free, ever-creative, ever-evolving, working everywhere at once through those simply open to Her Force. This is especially true in this critical evolutionary moment that threatens the very survival of Life as we know it.

with love,
~Savitra
(November 24, 2014)