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Opinion

# Counterview: Urging Centre to take over Auroville a call for serious overreach of State power

ASHISH KOTHARI 26 February, 2022 09:49 am IST



Auroville residents resisting bulldozing of forests, Dec 2021 | Photo: StandforAurovilleUnity.com | Special arra

When it comes to pronouncing judgements on a dispute between a grounded community trying to articulate its democratic rights, and a government that does not respect rights, it is all too easy to blame the ‘foreign hand’. In the case of the situation commented upon by Satheesh Namasivayam in ThePrint — ‘**Auroville doesn’t given right to undermine India’s laws. Govt must step in**’, 22 February 2022 — this becomes easier because actual foreigners are directly involved. But this superficial analysis hides a more complex picture, and completely glosses over the dubious intentions and the anti-democratic actions of the government itself.

Let me begin by stating my agreements with Namasivayam. As I have earlier commented in detail, **Auroville has a long way to go** in reconciling a number of issues of internal governance relations with neighbouring villages that have various shades of caste and class dimensions and all-too-common human weaknesses in striving for non-hierarchical, harmonious, and non-egotist ways of living. The idea of a Neighbourhood Advisory Council, or something along the lines which brings in more meaningful participation of local villages, is a good one, though I don’t think it should be restricted to ‘local panchayat presidents and prominent local leaders’ as Namasivayam advocates, but extended to the gram sabhas (village assemblies) as well.

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As I wrote in the above-mentioned essay, any further process of building towards the dawn' that Mirra Alfassa, The Mother, envisaged, needs to integrate its surrounding r This could build on the considerable work that Aurovilians are **already doing in these surroundings**, apart from their own internal innovations on agriculture, water, archit culture and much else that Namasivayam acknowledges. I stress that this is as impos objective and task for Auroville as any other aspect of trying to reach Sri Aurobindo's Mother's vision of humanity with a higher consciousness.



Part of the forests regenerated by Auroville's residents | Photo: Ashish Kothari | Special arrangement

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**Also read:** *Auroville doesn't give foreigners right to undermine India's laws. Govt m*

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## Namasivayam's omissions

That said, it is essential to also assert that this cannot happen in an atmosphere of intimidation and violence. This is precisely what Auroville has faced since 4 December a series of incidents that included **midnight bulldozing** of hundreds of trees and some structures of the Youth Centre, and bringing in hired hands from some distant villages to intimidate peacefully protesting residents. The entire chain of undemocratic events, undertaken at the behest of the Auroville Foundation's Governing Board (which, though an autonomous body, is in practice controlled by the central government), is part of an attempt to impose one model of infrastructure development including significant road construction.





*Path cleared through forest in Auroville, early December 2021 | Photo: Ashish Kothari | Special arrangement*

This proposal threatens thousands of trees in the threatened Tropical Dry Evergreen ecosystems that Auroville's residents have restored on deforested land; it also will block water passages in a watershed that is important for the water security of several tens of thousands of villagers. Residents have repeatedly presented alternative plans for the proposed Crown Road, which would save most of the trees and respect waterways, but these have been ignored.



*Proposed Crown Way road will go through wetlands like this, in Darkali forest | Photo: Ashish Kothari | Special*

All this is neatly omitted by Namasivayam in his article. So are a series of other intimations, such as the **gag order** on Auroville's Outreach Media unit issued in early December, a subsequent order by the Foundation Secretary to this unit to "hand over all the movable, immovable, tangible and intangible assets including space, phone number, email, social media archives, accounts maintained with Financial services, etc."

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There have also been direct and indirect threats to not renew visas for foreign residents participating in questioning the Foundation's actions, as if peacefully questioning to unilateral actions by an authority is not a fundamental human right of any person, re



of whether he or she is a 'citizen' in a place. Namasivayam's omission of all these incriminating information on which is all available in the public domain, cannot be a casual mistake. It seems to be deliberate so as not to expose the nature of the State.

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## Namasivayam's untruths

It is not only what is omitted, but also what is put into the article that shows the extremely one-sided nature of its analysis. This includes untruths. Auroville's residents are not asked to "legally challenge the contours of the (Auroville Foundation) Act", they are challenging the one-sided interpretation of the Act by the Foundation's power-holders. It is worth bearing in mind that the Act has a fine-tuned balance between its three constituent bodies: the Governing Board, the Resident's Assembly, and the International Advisory Council whose function is to advise the Board.

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In fact, when it was introduced in Parliament in 1988, Shiv Shankar, then-minister of resources development, said: "As far as the day-to-day activities are concerned, they will be looked after by the residents through appropriate autonomous arrangements, which include Residents' Assembly and its Working Committee. The idea underlying this arrangement is that the residents of Auroville should have autonomy so that activities in Auroville can grow under an atmosphere conducive to harmonious growth."

This commitment has been completely violated by the recent actions of the Foundation's Governing Board, in which there was no consultation with the Residents' Assembly. The Auroville Foundation Act explicitly mandates such consultation, as also empowers the Residents' Assembly to formulate the master plan and carry out other related activities (which would necessarily also involve interpreting and evolving previous master plans if felt by residents to be outdated). This is way beyond Namasivayam's contention that residents are supposed to only 'assist' the Governing Board; this is either poor reading of the Act, or a deliberate and mischievous distortion.

Namasivayam also ignores history; not only Shiv Shankar's assurance quoted above, but the words of Prof Kireet Joshi who framed the Auroville Foundation Act: "this Act ... is formulated that it would facilitate what Mother has called "divine anarchy" ... that is there is no rule from outside ... there is an utter freedom given to the Residents' Assembly experiment, to make research and to devise forms by which the divine anarchy can be ... If the residents of Auroville know how to do it, if they ripen themselves into that consciousness, this freedom is ensured in the Act. In the meantime ... although there is a Governing Board which may from outside seem to be a Board which ... you might say has authority, this Governing Board is required to consult the Residents' Assembly according to the Act itself, and there are provisions in the functions of the Residents' Assembly where it is laid down that Residents' Assembly will organise all the activities of Auroville."

Namasivayam says there are 2,500 residents and 10,000 villagers serving them. To the best of my knowledge, there are about 3,300 residents and about 5,000 villagers working in Auroville. It is also worth mentioning that about half the residents are Indians, including many Tamilians whose origins are in the neighbouring villages. I repeat, this should not gloss over the issues of inequality mentioned above, but distorting figures is not a great way of making a point. And as far as I know, there is no "spirituality tests for villagers (that) resemble infamous virginity tests"; this is a serious and potentially libellous accusation whose veracity is unclear. Every person wanting residency status in Auroville goes through a process; there is a special, separate 'spirituality test' for villagers.

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## Namasivayam's dangerous call

Next, there has to my understanding not been a single action where Aurovilians have undermined Indian laws, much less its 'territorial integrity'. Namasivayam's flimsy evidence for these serious charges is about some foreign youth challenging the jurisdiction of the police during the above-mentioned incidents, and "one youth" challenging the jurisdiction of the Auroville Foundation's Secretary (a central government appointee). First, the video I have seen shows a young woman simply telling the police that 'this is illegal', which, given that the bulldozing was happening in the dead of night and without work orders, is perfectly understandable. She says that they should come back in the day with proper laws.

This is not the same thing as challenging the legal jurisdiction of the police, which Namasivayam alleges (unless he has some other video of some other youth, which he then produce). And incidentally, the police themselves understood the situation and withdrew. Second, by what stretch of imagination can 'one youth' challenging the authority of the Foundation Secretary be said to be equated as "foreign residents' rebellion against Indian authorities" or challenging "India's territorial integrity"? These, and the title of the article, are a pretty breathtaking piece of false generalisation. And based on this spurious analytic

Namasivayam urges the central government to take over Auroville using an “emerger ordinance”. This is a call for serious overreach of State power.

Such a call falls conveniently into the lap of a State that has become increasingly aut attempting to push its own vision of a neoliberal, religious nationalist agenda in **mar India** that New Delhi considers its ‘frontiers’. I comment on this in some detail in my mentioned article, and will not repeat it here. The “political shock” that Namasivayar Auroville needs, which the central government has “recently initiated”, is in no way g help solve the internal and external issues on which the author and I seem to have s agreement, mentioned above. Rather, they are one more attempt at introducing crass commercialisation of tourism and rapid urbanisation, and putting local attempts at autonomous governance in their ‘right place’, that is subservient to the State.

Namasivayam also conveniently does not include news of a series of consultations at gatherings that residents have had in the last couple of months, to arrive at a democr decision on the proposals for Auroville’s Master Plan, the Crown Road, etc. On 26 Jan a fully documented and transparent process, the formal decision-making process of t Residents’ Assembly voted overwhelmingly for a “pause (to) all clearing, infrastructure and permanent construction work ... in order to enable the community to define a wa for Auroville’s development, following: Collective processes – The Master Plan: Persp 2025’ framework, and other relevant regulations.” This does not in any way support Namasivayam’s contention that Aurovilians are challenging “India’s territorial integri taking place is an innovative ‘dreamweaving’ process to bring in all available informa expertise, and perspectives on how Auroville should be developed, which should be s to take its own democratic and knowledge-based course rather than be undermined bulldozers, gag orders and intimidation.

In over 50 years of its experiment, with all its successes and failures, Auroville appea had a good relationship with government authorities. Residents have repeatedly exp their gratitude to the generosity of the Indian people and the central and state govern not only enabling but supporting their ambitious experiment. Undoubtedly, there ha tensions, internal and external (which community does not have them?).

The internal divisions over what kind of infrastructural developments should take pl implement The Mother’s vision. But resolving these cannot be done through violent and top-down imposition by the State, siding with one view held by a few residents, i alternative plans that other residents have provided which can help avoid ecological disruption, and sidestepping the consultative process mandated by the Auroville Fou Act. If the Indian State is serious about democracy (and that of course is a very big ‘if’ high-handedness is completely the wrong direction to go.

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(Edited by Prashant)



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