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Auroville – Reaching Out

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Auroville presently brings together twelve hundred people from thirty-two nations, of which a third come from the surrounding area. North and South, East and West join on a shared plateau where the rural, the modern and the traditional co-exist. Auroville represents an attempt in an increasingly divided world, to establish the basis of a sustainable collaborative society, living in an atmosphere of harmony and mutual respect.

To attempt to describe Auroville is similar to the proverbial five blind people trying to describe an elephant, when each is holding onto a different part. One can only speak the truth of one's own experience, listen carefully to what the others are saying, and try to understand. It is a process that takes time. And because Auroville is at the same time growing, evolving, it is a process that continues.

“I want to insist on the fact that this will be an experiment, it is for making experiments-experiments, researches, studies.”

Mother, 30 December 1967

“Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.”

Mother, 28 February 1968

“Auroville wants to be a universal township where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realize human unity.”

Mother, 28 February 1968

How is Auroville attempting to realize this vision? It keeps on trying...The challenges are diverse; both the inner and the outer. There are contradictions, hypocrisies, injustices. There is also responsibility, generosity, competence, beauty, and a quest for perfection. Sometimes people are tired and frustrated; sometimes full of energy

and joy. Consequently, one gets mixed reports about Auroville. We are trying...and piece-by-piece, succeeding.

In this spirit, we would like to provide information on a few of the projects at the local, national, and international levels that have recently been initiated within Auroville, along with a broader evaluation of the work that has been done with the local villages, to exemplify some of the dimensions in which we connect with the outside world

Appropriate technology

Solar and wind energy promotion

This year, in a joint venture between TATA BP Solar, Siemens, Integrated Finance Company, Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency (IREDA) and Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) as a nodal agency, a major solar photovoltaic pump project, involving the installation and commissioning of 132 solar powered pumping systems in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka was completed.

Additionally, a Solar Photovoltaic Water Pumping Workshop was organized by IREDA and CSR with sponsorship from the Ministry of Non-Conventional Energy Sources (MNES) at CSR. The workshop, which focused on the economic viability, future potential, marketing strategies and the technical perspectives underlying solar water pumping systems in India, was attended by representative users, nodal agency decision makers, manufacturers, financing agencies and community developers active in the field of renewable energy applications. High level presentations and intensive deliberations were complemented by on-site visits to renewable energy and SPV installations in and around Auroville, and by video film shows on Auroville Renewables. A monograph bringing together all the presentations made at the workshop was published afterwards for reference and information of the renewable energy community in India and the world at large.

A Windmill Research Project, sponsored by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Germany, to improve the overall efficiency and output of water pumping windmills by developing and field-testing various loadmatching devices was completed this year. In the course of this project a close working relationship was established with the Wind Energy Group of the University of Technology in Eindhoven, Netherlands. A 45-page final report, describing the work was published in December 1995.

Building technologies

For the second year in a row, the Auroville Building Centre (AV-BC) has won the Outstanding Performance Award, as the best building centre in India, from the Ministry of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation. AV-BC is part of a national network of more than 300 building centres all over India, set up by The Housing and Urban Development Corporation to provide training and assistance in appropriate cost-effective building technologies.

Presently, at the request of Building Materials and Technology Promotion Council (BMTPC), Govt. of India, the Auroville Building Centre, in conjunction with the

NGO Development Alternatives in New Delhi, is preparing India's Code of Practice for Ferrocement Roofing Channels.

Recently HUDCO has sanctioned a Rs. 13.25 lakhs grant to set up a Mobile Training Unit at the Auroville Building Centre. The aim of this grant, which is yet to be released, is to bring cost-effective technologies from the laboratory to the rural poor.

Information super highway

Auronet is a bulletin board service within Auroville. It has forums where Aurovilians can exchange information rapidly on a number of themes, from Sustainable Development to Current affairs. There are 250 users on Auronet now.

We have recently become a 'web-site' on the Internet. Internet users from all over the world can now select 'Auroville' and get a general picture of Auroville and more specific information on various topics, such as visiting or joining the community.

Work is currently beginning (Summer 1996) to drastically improve the ways in which we generate and share information within the community. The Archives, along with various working groups and units are collaborating to develop a comprehensive, on-line database of information from Auroville's early beginnings to current events. One problem in Auroville, is that we often do not know what each other is doing, and we miss many opportunities to coordinate and cooperate.

Working with the villagers

When Aurovilians first came to the area in 1968, what they found was a picture of poverty, both economic and environmental: to the eye, a bleak expanse of barren red earth scarred by gullies and ravines with only an occasional palm or lone banyan to dot the horizon. And to the heart, a mass of thin people complaining of not enough food, no money, of sickness and hopelessness.

The population is largely agrarian, or on the coast, fisherpeople, although there is a strong drift of young people to the cities for employment. Vanur Block was classified in 1984 as 'backward and in need of development,' and is a 'reserved' constituency allotted for harijans. The majority of the population is landless or marginal farmers. The average wage is about Rs. 500 a month; the literacy rate not more than 40%.

Auroville's efforts

As the poverty of the land and the population were clearly interlinked, it was possible for Auroville to make multiple efforts in many areas, each helping the other, despite lack of formal coordination. The good results, such as they are, depend on the people's effort. The people were very eager to work and, for instance, projects to plant trees, bund and fence the land, provided employment and cash to the people as well as directly working with the environmental problems.

Simultaneously, fledgling commercial and construction undertakings provided training and employment in crafts, trades and supervision, so that over the years, many people became self-employed and others skilled, responsible, salaried employees.

Also, small schools for village children were established in nearby villages, which coincided with a general trend among villagers toward appreciation of education, which resulted in an increasing number of young village people finishing school and entering university. A Health Centre began to treat the populace at its clinic, and village development societies were organised in several communities.

Auroville as an 'intentional city' has been modeling two rare qualities in city building. One, it has restored its environment, rather than ravaging it. And, two, it seeks to sustain the life and culture of its surrounding populace. The Auroville experiment wants to see that the surrounding area is nurtured by its presence, growing lush, green, prosperous and cultivated.

Education

The main village development approach chosen by Auroville has been intensive education of young men and women in the mechanisms of social work and communication, and immediate application in their own and nearby villages. The result is that in 32 villages and hamlets surrounding Auroville, groups of youth, groups of women, or both, are meeting regularly to plan and carry out small-scale village improvement projects such as:

- Deepening wells and water catchment tanks.
- Repairing and constructing schools and youth club buildings.
- Repairing roads, making culverts, etc.
- Running reading rooms and small libraries.
- Improving bus service.
- etc.

Education of children and youth

Since the beginning, the children of the villages have received special attention from Aurovilians. Schools for village children, nutrition programs, playgrounds and sports programs were part of the early activities. In some cases children were 'adopted,' singly or in groups and raised in Auroville. The result has been that today, there are many village-born young men and women who live in Auroville as members of the community, of which quite a few are holding responsible positions.

Presently there are six educational centres for village children located in Auroville, and three programs conducted in the villages.

- **New Creation** – a community and school for 200 children. The day school includes crèche, kindergarten, and classes 1 – 7.
- **Ilaignarkal** – an evening school providing classes in Tamil, English and general knowledge, especially for young workers from the local villages and Auroville units. Besides, there is a day program-cum-vocational training for 10 – 14 year olds.
- **Arul Varhi** – a project of the residents of the Auroville community of Promesse. There are no hired teachers, and a great deal of attention is given to individual students. There is a kindergarten program for 22 children of 4 – 6 years, and an

after school, body awareness and cultural expression program for 100 children of 6 – 15 years.

- **Isai Ambalam** – a day school primarily for children who have dropped out of the normal schools for various reasons. Altogether, it serves 80 children from five villages.
- **Life Education Centre** – an experimental school to induce older, working children to continue schooling. The 25 students (mostly young women) are trained in vocational arts such as food processing, typing, tailoring, needlework. They also learn reading, writing, English, maths and social awareness.
- **Kuilapalayam School Trust** – an independent organisation whose Board of Trustees consists of educated young men from the village (two of whom are Aurovilians) who, with the financial help of an Auroville commercial unit, have created a school for children of the nearby villages. They plan to expand the school each year as the children are promoted; presently there is kindergarten through 5th standard. This school uses the conventional government curriculum and is accredited by the Dept. of Education. The difference is in the quality of the hired teachers who were selected with great care after massive interviewing, and who are encouraged to exercise creativity in their teaching.

Village health care

Auroville established its Health Center in 1973 which now serves the village population at its main and three sub-centres. It aims to realise 'Primary Health Care' as defined by the World Health Organisation, ie. a level of health care which concentrates on the most prevalent and most relevant problems of the whole communal body that is being served.

Auroville works at three levels in the field of health:

1. **Curative Services** – these include:
 - Doctor consultations (3380 visits monthly).
 - Dressings (3640 monthly).
 - Daily first aid at each of 26 villages.
 - Pregnancy check-ups and deliveries.
 - Dental care.
2. **Preventive Medicine** – current projects:
 - On-going training of 29 health workers about causes of illnesses, nutrition, and hygiene.
 - Follow-up of TB and other communicable diseases in all the villages.
 - Garbage collection and composting project in Kuilapalayam.
 - Sanitation: improving water supply, drainage, and building toilets.
3. **Health Education** – uses various approaches as appropriate:
 - Child-to-child education at the village schools four days a week.
 - Dramas and puppet shows on health education are played every fortnight at different villages.

- Food demonstrations and kitchen gardens in all the villages.
- Exhibitions of posters, films and slide shows on health education are frequently presented in all the villages.

Employment and business opportunities

Auroville employs over 5,000 people, many of whom have been trained on the job. Areas of work range from excavation to engineering and include cleaning, agriculture and gardening, driving, housekeeping, accounting, teaching, sales, store keeping, supervising, all construction and maintenance trades, handicraft and needle work, and computer related work.

Auroville is encouraging its workers to save for retirement and a Retirement Scheme has been set up. Under it, the savings are built up by contributions from the worker, the employer and the compound interest.

In addition to the jobs in the workshops and business, construction sites, farms and houses of Auroville, there has been a blossoming of small-scale business. Shopkeepers and building contractors, manufacturers of leather work, woodwork, lampshades, crochet and knitting, natural dyeing, batik, stone carving and many others are flourishing now in the area.

On-going challenges

Although many beginnings have been made, and even many good results achieved, in working with the challenges presented by the environmental and economic poverty of neighbourhood of Auroville, there are still many areas which require continuing effort and as yet unthought of approaches.

One thing to keep in mind, though, is that Auroville is not a village development society, but an experiment for a large group of volunteers interested in tackling the problems besetting humanity through preparing the ground for a radical change in human consciousness. To deliberately take up this essentially inner work is the basis of joining Auroville.

In this context, the villagers present a significant challenge, but not the whole focus of the Auroville endeavor. How to honour their rights as the original inhabitants of the land, the host to the experiment, as fellow humans in the effort toward human unity, remains as yet insufficiently understood. How to learn the quiet lessons of their traditional culture? How to avoid imposing on them and yet maintain the main thread of our endeavor?

To be sure, a deepening spiritual insight into the fundamental oneness will bring Aurovilians closer to the answers, and practical solutions will flow out of that insight. But meanwhile, ways and means of including the material and cultural needs of the villages in the Auroville development planning needs to be worked out.

Environment

When the first Auroville settlers moved to this plateau in 1968, they were confronted by a land that was visibly dying; the result of two hundred years of deforestation, overgrazing, and other bad land management practices. Occasional palm trees,

mangoes, thorns, neem, cashews, and a few lone banyan trees dotted a vast open expanse of red earth scarred by a network of gullies and ravines, carved out over the years by torrential monsoon rains. Previously the land had been covered by scrub jungle. According to temple inscriptions and local records, tigers and elephants once roamed the area.

The first needs to confront Auroville's earliest settlers were those of shade and water. When the first communities started, water had to be brought in barrels by bullock cart from as far as three kilometres away. Wells were dug, cartloads of compost collected, and trees planted. As the lands were fenced off to protect the seedling trees from goats, cows, and firewood foragers, tensions frequently ran high among villagers over grazing rights. Simultaneously, the first phases of land regeneration began with efforts toward an integrated soil and water conservation program. This eventually involved the digging of thousands of kilometres of 'bunds' (raised earth banks and ditches) to catch and hold rain water and control erosion due to runoff. It was a process of trial and error, and over the years bunding became more systematic and comprehensive.

As the trees grew and micro-climates formed, bird life returned to the area, and much natural dissemination of seeds is now occurring. Forests have started to propagate themselves, and it is now estimated that over two million trees cover much of the Auroville 2600 acres of area, spread out in patches of two to more than one hundred acres. The knowledge, dedication, and hard work of the people involved in this development have made 'Auroville' a household word in India's environmental community.

The work continues.

Aranya project

The International Development Research Centre has funded a project in Auroville to recreate coastal forest on degraded land. The East Coast Evergreen Forest, which once extended from Madras to Kanyakumari is now down to two tiny patches. We have planted 48 species of trees identified from these forests in the last year.

Interactions have also begun with persons from the nearby village of Manaveli, and a program of fodder cultivation is being worked out with them. The potential for tree crops and plants which can be used for natural dyes, to be planted on degraded village lands is also being explored.

Integrated watershed management

Integrated Watershed Management is being coordinated by Palmyra, the centre for ecological land use and rural development. To date, 1400 ha have been covered by this project. Over 20 lakh trees have been raised in the Aurobrindavan Nursery, of which 15 lakhs have been planted. Thirty-five earthen check dams have been constructed. A video documentary about this work, sponsored by the NWDB, is being made.

In addition, two workshops a month are being held, as well as a number of orientation courses for farmers, NGOs and Government officials. In December, a workshop

will be held for thirty Indian Forest Service officials, in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

ARISE

In April 95, Palmyra organised ARISE (Agricultural Renewal in India for a Sustainable Environment). This conference brought together over a hundred people involved in organic agriculture – activists, farmers, and academics from all over India. They spent several days here discussing how to resurrect the ancient traditions of sustainability in India.

The conference resolved, among other things, to work on means for protecting biodiversity through the establishment of community seed banks, promotion of organic agriculture, and watershed regeneration, as well as promoting farmer-to-farmer interactions through the establishment of cooperatives.

Indian army officers environmental training

After a visit to Auroville by the Chief of Army Staff, ten army officers from different eco-battalions around the country were deputed here. They underwent a one-week training in environmental regeneration techniques. The interaction with them was of great value to Auroville as well, for the exposure we got concerning the techniques now being used for environmental work by the army.

Peacetrees

The very first Peacetrees project was held in Auroville six years ago. It brought together youth from different countries to plant trees and ‘to heal the earth as they heal each other.’

There have been seventeen Peacetrees projects held so far in different parts of the world – urban ghettos, endangered wilderness areas, and war-torn countries, and this year it was Auroville’s turn again. The program brought together sixty young people, of whom eight were from Auroville and the surrounding areas, and twelve from other parts of India.

Their activities included tree planting along the East Coast Road and in Auroville, desilting an ancient temple tank, and also work at the construction site of the new solar kitchen.

‘Troubled Waters’ video

After initial research conducted in the immediate area revealed that salt water intrusion was becoming a reality in local coastal villages, further research discovered that a much more advanced problem existed in a Southern part of the state. This led to a grant from DANIDA for the production of a video aimed at educating coastal farmers on sustainable water use patterns. ‘Troubled Waters,’ produced by Auroville Video in Tamil with English sub-titles uses local actors to dramatize the plight due to salt water intrusion because of over-pumping by farmers and villagers in a once-fertile coastal area of Tirunelveli district. It also provides indications as regards measures to be taken in watershed management to remedy the situation. Aimed at

NGOs and farmers, the video's goal is to stimulate discussion and awareness of water as a common resource as well as encourage the implementation of sustainable techniques of watershed management.

Medicinal plants project

Years of work by Auroville greenworkers and botanists, that has increasingly been concentrated on research into the indigenous flora of the area, received recognition when the herbarium at Shakti and the seed centre at Pitchandikulam were designated as two of the forty centres set up in the South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu by the Foundation For the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions based in Bangalore. This Foundation and the centres it funds, in collaboration with State Forest departments, is working to save India's ethno-botanical heritage.

The Auroville seed centre has, to date, collected stocks and samples of 320 local seeds with medicinal properties. More than fifty varieties of seeds exist in sufficient quantities to be distributed to physicians and interested individuals of the local area and neighbouring states. In collaboration with the AV Health Centre, it has also produced a catalogue and manual on how to use the seeds. Sets of seventeen plants will be distributed to 200 local families.

Shakti has a herbarium of 500 plants and has raised 100,000 seedlings which will be distributed by the Pitchandikulam team to naturopaths and other interested people in the region.

Conclusion

In this document, we have briefly tried to illustrate what are just the legs and tail of this elephant of Auroville. The heart and soul are much more difficult to see or describe; yet this is where the real work is being done. If we are to live up to our destiny of being the 'city the earth needs,' it is this inner treasure that we need to develop and share.