

Auroville Outreach



A newsletter from Auroville international township

August 1999

Harvest: ensuring water for all

Auroville's Water Service split its operation some years ago to meet separate needs for Auroville and the surrounding bio-region. The original service based at Abri continues to look after Auroville's wells and water supply infrastructure, but the other half now operates under the name 'Harvest' from Naidu House in the nearby village of Kottakarai, and provides a much wider service.

Harvest has set itself the massive task of ensuring long term supplies of good quality water for the whole bio-region via its self-created Kaluveli Watershed Project. This project was initiated around 1996 when it was found that salt water intrusion had already started in the nearby coastal area, thanks to over-extraction of ground water, poor agricultural practices and disrepair of the original

system of monsoon water harvesting tanks/reservoirs. It was foreseen that if nothing was done to correct the situation, saline intrusion would spread further inland to affect the whole Auroville area and parts of the surrounding bio-region.

The Kaluveli Watershed covers an area of 760 square kilometres and directly affects the lives of some 350,000 people. The project was initiated in 1997 as a pilot research and methodology project for environmental regeneration with the following three goals:

the rehabilitation of 192 rain harvesting tanks plus hundreds of ponds and their surrounding catchment areas.

the extension of sustainable rural practices in the fields of agriculture and land & resource usage.

the empowerment of local people in water management for their own

Auroville is an international township in Tamil Nadu, South India, founded in 1968.

Inspired by the vision of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, about 1,500 people from India and some 30 other nations are building a township dedicated to an experiment in human unity, with the eventual hope of contributing to international understanding, peace and the evolution of human consciousness. Nearly 5,000 of the 40,000+ local people living in the dozen-or-more villages that comprise the Auroville bio-region are also involved in the project, providing their skills and labour.

The township, projected for 50,000 people, will radiate out from the central Matrimandir and its surrounding gardens in 4 zones, the International, Cultural, Residential and Industrial. A large forested area, the Green Belt, will eventually surround the entire township area.

Present activities in Auroville include wasteland reclamation and reforestation, organic farming, village development, education, health care, renewable energy, appropriate building technology, arts and culture, handicrafts and small-scale industries, architecture and town planning.

As described by its founder, Auroville aspires to be "a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities."



Working on renovation of a sluice

future via the creation of a self sustaining user-based tool for rural development, the Kaluveli Watershed Development Agency.

Once restored, the various rain harvesting tanks and ponds will provide fresh water for human consumption and irrigation, while also reducing run-off, erosion and flooding, and creating sites for a variety of wildlife. Most important, however, the improved groundwater recharge should flush out the salt water intrusion, ensuring the area remains suitable for human habitation.

In support of the work, Auroville's Harvest team plan to set up and train over 200 User Associations (UAs). With Harvest's engineering support, these UAs will then take over ongoing management of the tanks and ponds. Meanwhile 10 Federations of UAs will be registered as NGOs, able to connect the local people with Government

schemes. The total proposal, with projected cost of 35 crores rupees (a p p r o x 8,300,000 US dollars), is b e i n g forwarded to the Federal Ministry of Rural Areas & Employment for sanction under India's "Million Wells Scheme".

Since 1997, using Tamil Nadu Government schemes to implement the work, 10 tanks and 3 ponds have already been renovated and 15 UAs formed. For 1999, 11 more tanks, 13 (drinking water) ponds and 2 major check dams are listed. Meanwhile, 2 mechanical excavators donated by the Sri Dorabji Tata Trust have arrived, and will speed up the work. The first



Raising a water catchment tank wall by over a metre

Federation should be registered during the summer, incorporating 21 UAs (including Auroville).

In parallel with this pioneering work, a campaign has also begun to put a commercial value on maintaining the restored tanks and ponds, by introducing aquaculture. Three ponds were stocked last December with species considered suitable for fish farming, amid much enthusiasm, and groups of women and youth from the poorer levels of village society were empowered to oversee the stock. The harvest will be shared one-third for the aquaculturists, one-third for the village UA (for pond maintenance) and one third to provide capital investment for the following year. If this trial is successful, a broader dissemination of freshwater aquaculture is proposed.

A further foreseen spin-off from the project is the possibility of working with village farmers on sustainable agriculture, involving crops now rarely grown because of erratic monsoons. With the availability of water for irrigation from the restored tanks should come the possibility of restoring/maintaining traditional agricultural practices. The 6 acres around Naidu House are being used as a demonstration plot in support of this concept, though with the introduction of organic farming and drip irrigation. Meanwhile an additional farm has been rented in an inland village 20 km from Auroville, and will become a base for

A mine of detailed information

Spread over 117 pages, The Auroville Handbook (previously the Auroville Information Directory) is now available. It provides all the detailed information that a visitor, guest, Newcomer or even an established Aurovilian could want to know relating to Auroville. Specific contents include:

- services & working groups
- guest houses & guest services
- commercial units
- Matrimandir & Matrimandir Gardens
- schools & educational opportunities
- health facilities
- the environment, renewable energy & alternative technology
- Auroville International Centres
- donor agencies
- sources of further information.

The Handbook also provides essential information on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and shops and facilities in Pondy; includes a comprehensive 18-page index; and incorporates the latest updated 3-colour map of the Auroville area.

Copies can be obtained locally via the Auroville Boutiques, selected outlets in Pondicherry or at the Visitors Centre Information Desk. Alternatively, mail order copies can be obtained by sending a bankers draft or money order to:

Auroville Communication Centre, CSR, Auroshilpam,
Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Cost including post & packing is Rs. 150 in India, or the equivalent of \$6 abroad.



organic agriculture and watershed management.

Last but not least, an educational comic suitable for all ages “from 7 to 77” is in process of being written and illustrated. It should help spread understanding of the importance of maintaining good local water supplies, specially among children, who when they grow up will become decision-makers themselves, able to affect the continuity of supply.

For more info e-mail:
harvest@auroville.org.in

Stabilised earth roads

The cost of laying and maintaining tarmac roads can be prohibitive. They also so often destroy the natural look of an otherwise unspoiled landscape. With these considerations in mind, Auroville is currently conducting an interesting experiment to see if the technology used by Auroville in stabilised earth block manufacture can also be applied to road construction.

In mid 1998 a stretch of 30 metres was set aside on a much used 5-metre-width Auroville road for the laying of a trial stretch of ‘stabilised earth’ road with shoulder/drainage channel. Four different subsoil + cement + lime + alum mixes were laid (with cement content ranging from 5% to 10%), and a speed-breaker using 10% cement also set in the middle of the stretch. The whole area was then compressed using a small one-man tamping machine plus hand ramming, and was left to cure for a period of a month. The complete operation took 18 men 12 days.

It wasn’t long after opening the trial stretch that the main monsoon started, and torrential rains and heavy traffic combined to put the surfaces to a severe test. Then came the long dry post-monsoon period, with dust acting like an abrasive on the test surfaces.

The initial cost of laying the trial

stretch appeared to be higher than a comparable stretch of tarmac road, according to figures obtained. However, the latter figures are suspect, as they don’t appear to cover all costs, and it may be that the difference is only slight. Meanwhile the soil-cement road consumes less energy. It also requires more labour, which in a rural context makes sense. The final assessment will have to wait a year or two, when we can make realistic calculations for wear and tear, assess long term maintenance requirements, and so on. For now, all we can say is that the test stretch seems to be holding up well.

Obviously the hope is that if the soil-cement road proves to be as durable, simple to maintain and cost-effective as envisioned, it will prove to be a good alternative to current rural roads, pathways and parking sites, and specially appropriate for areas of natural beauty.

For more info e-mail:
csr@auroville.org.in

Meeting human need collectively

Jothi is a long established Tamil Aurovilian, born in a nearby village, who became involved with Auroville some 26 years ago. Now aged 34, for the last 22 years he has been living in Auroville, working most recently in the town planning facility ‘Auroville’s Future’ and also coaching in basketball.

Towards the end of last year Jothe became very ill. He was diagnosed as having serious kidney disease, and ended up at the Tamil Nadu Hospital near Chennai/Madras for treatment. When this failed to help, it became clear that the only hope of saving him lay in a transplant within 6 months. The minimal cost quoted by the hospital was 3.5 lakhs, covering only the medical lead-up and operation, a figure completely beyond Jothe’s personal means; and on top of that it was clear there would be other hefty

bills for accommodation, transport, post-operative treatment, etc.

“Auroville is like a living organism,” it is sometimes said, “it responds like a single entity in a coordinated and caring way when any part of it is in trouble.” This was Jothe’s experience. Within hours of his hearing how serious his situation was, a small group of close friends went into action, putting out appeals for help to fellow Aurovilians and sending out messages via the Internet to the Auroville International groups and other supportive individuals around the world. The search for a suitable donor also began, and a “support” team was formed, including fellow Aurovilians from India, Germany, Italy and America.

It wasn’t long before the money began to flow in, including a very generous donation of Rs.3.56 lakhs from a European Aurovilian. It continued to flow, from the UK, Holland, France, Germany and the USA, until the total exceeded 6.4 lakhs (US \$15,300), and meanwhile a suitable donor was also found. While this was happening people in Auroville and around the world were kept informed of Jothe’s situation via the Internet.

Jothi himself remained calm and unafraid. He says he felt full of trust that all would work out OK, and “very protected”. He knew that Auroville was supposed to be like one big family; now he was able to experience what that really meant, as not only money but other offers of help in the form of therapies came in, including from people he had not previously had contact with.

Before his operation one last call went out to Aurovilians and supporters everywhere, to concentrate their love and attention on Jothe and the donor for the transplant, and pray that both would come through OK. Shortly after 3.00 pm that day Auroville got the news that these prayers had been answered, and that both were safely through and recovering from their ordeal.

Today Jothi is back to a normal life in Auroville, able to live unaided, and back at work doing computer mapping at home using a freshly donated computer; though he will need to attend for follow-up checks and treatment at the Tamil Nadu Hospital for some time to come. The donor is fine.

Asked to comment on what he went through, Jothi stated: "It was a very intensive period of my life. The whole experience of my renal failure which lead to the kidney transplant, and the immediate response in my time of need by Aurovilians and Auroville friends around the globe, rejuvenated my faith in both Auroville and the Aurovilians. Especially the way they reached out to me in various

ways: words of encouragement, support, faith, hope, prayers and love, has touched me deep in my heart."

Shikra: promoting awareness of the environment

Shikra is a quarterly booklet for environmental education aimed at Aurovillian and local school children, as well as more mature readers. It is published by Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research (SAIIER), Auroville, and is being used as a text book in Auroville's schools. Four issues have

been published to date, covering subjects like Jackals, Banyan Trees, Spotted Owlets, Chameleons, snakes and the Shikra Hawk. The first issue has also been translated into Tamil for distribution in local village schools. Both English and Tamil editions are equally well suited for use as learning tools in either language.

Jackal in full cry



As the environment is a worldwide issue, there is a huge need in India for children's books which deal directly with the subject. The aim of Shikra is to meet this need, by increasing awareness of the many species of interesting animals and plants which are commonly found in this part of the world, and giving some factual knowledge about them. This is being done by way of fresh, straightforward material, combined with humour in the form of cartoon illustrations, though included in the text are many scientific facts.

In the long term it is hoped that Shikra will help to inspire the younger generation to appreciate and value the natural world around them, so that as they grow up and take up positions of responsibility themselves, they will wish to preserve it in its full diversity.

For more information write to: Shikra, Gratitude, Auroville 605101



Enquiries or feedback relating to this newsletter and its contents are always welcome, and can be communicated to: Auroville Outreach, Bharat Nivas, Auroville 605101, India

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