

APPENDIX 1 A SHORT HISTORY OF FARMING IN AUROVILLE

(this is based on a paper written for the 2004 Farm Assessment)

Farming in Auroville - a difficult job

When the first settlers arrived they found a depleted land on which traditional farmers in the villages were doing their best to grow food.

The plateau on which Auroville was to be manifest was not a welcoming place. Stretching to the horizon in every direction there was only barren, burnt, dry red soil with little vegetation and no trees. There were no bore wells so farmers had to rely on uncertain monsoon rains, which made growing food a very tentative enterprise. Although drought-resistant crops such as millets were grown - in preference to the less drought-resistant rice - an adequate harvest was completely dependent on forces outside the farmer's control. Failure of the harvest and subsequent food shortages happened all too often.

Monsoon rains fell for only a few months in the year and for the remaining time the land was left bare and open to the ravages of wind and sun and entirely at the mercy of large numbers of goats and cows. Human foragers for food, fuel and shelter material ensured that anything not eaten would eventually be cut. In such a cycle each year brought more of a struggle to produce adequate amounts of food. Each year there was less energy for the land conservation measures necessary to check the downward spiral of the land's fertility.

Yet it had not always been like this. Around two hundred years ago the Auroville plateau and its surrounding area was covered in a special sort of scrub jungle known as 'tropical dry evergreen forest'. This consisted of an uninterrupted mass of green, three or four metres high, interspersed with small trees that never formed a closed canopy. It contained a very wide variety of shrubs, vines and lianas and could be so dense that it was impossible to penetrate. A stone discovered in the area, dating from 1750, described the local king hunting for elephants and tigers in this forest.

In 1825 the first trees were felled in an area close to Pondicherry to drive away the tigers. In the following years the forests were cut down to provide wood to build the nearby cities of Pondicherry and Kalapet as well as for export. The British accelerated the process of forest destruction by allocating plots of land to anyone who would clear it and cultivate it for a year. Individuals who took up such allocations would often do so just for the first harvest after which much of the land was left fallow. Under the violent onslaught of subsequent monsoons, erosion began. The last remaining plots of forest in the Auroville area - two thousand neem trees - were cut down in the mid fifties to make boats.

In less than two hundred years what had once been green and fertile had been turned into an expanse of baked red earth scarred with gullies and ravines. Each year tons of the remaining topsoil was swept into the sea, turning it red. Coming to such a place, the first needs that confronted Auroville's earliest settlers were for shade and water. In the beginning everyone who came to Auroville was a green worker and everyone planted trees. Since Auroville started one or two million trees have been planted. No one really knows. The greening of this once desert plain is one of the big success stories of Auroville.

In the 1960s, when the Indian Government joined in the promotion of industrialised agriculture, cropping patterns changed. Instead of mixed farming, monoculture was encouraged and with it the heavy use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Concurrently there was a move away from growing food crops to growing cash crops such as casuarina trees (for wood), coconuts and cashews. Free electricity for farmers encouraged over use of water which has led to a lowering of water tables and, in some coastal areas, salt water seepage

into fresh water wells.

In 1971, when asked if chemical pesticides could be used on Auroville farms, the Mother emphatically replied in the negative. She insisted:

'Auroville should not fall back into old errors which belong to a past that is trying to revive.'

As a result, since 1968, when the first of Auroville's farms came into existence, farming has been carried out using natural approaches. Farmers strive to use no pesticides or chemicals and a variety of organic approaches such as agro-forestry, permaculture and bio-dynamic and other techniques are continuously being used and evaluated.

Today, Auroville's thirteen farms comprise approximately 400 acres of cultivated land and range in size from 2 acres to 135 acres in total area. The farms are co-managed by around 35 Auroville residents employing around 200 full-time workers from the surrounding villages. In the circle surrounding the City, known as the Green Belt, there is a region on the western side targeted for the expansion of farming, as it is most advantageous in relation to water availability and land quality. Buddha Garden, which is next to Siddhartha Farm, is located in this area.

The Farm Group, consisting of most of Auroville's farm managers, takes collective responsibility for the management of Auroville's agricultural resources. Since 1993 the group has been meeting twice monthly and working to ensure that optimal use is made of available assets, to address financial and other problems, and to define policies for land development. Since its inception the group has tried its utmost to collaborate firstly with Aspiration Pour Tous and later Solar Kitchen Pour Tous which are Auroville's community food shops. They also work with a number of food-processing units and the Solar Kitchen (the community dining hall) to produce what people in the community want to eat as well as deal effectively with fluctuations and surpluses in what is produced by the farmers.

Auroville is, however, far from achieving self-sufficiency in food. At present as a rough estimate Auroville produces only 2% of its total rice and grain and less than 50% of its total fruit and vegetable requirements. Farms strive to produce more for the community but as the distribution of their produce takes place via an internal market they have to compete with outside markets to which many Aurovilans are drawn. They have lower prices with more variety and the food appears more attractive even although the produce will have been produced using socially-exploitative practices and probably be heavily dosed with chemicals. There is also the problem that many things which Aurovilians like to eat – such as potatoes, cabbage, broccoli – cannot be grown in this climate or like salad and tomatoes can only be grown for a few months of the year.

In 2003 a Farm Assessment Process was carried out. This was in two parts, the first of which aimed to evaluate the management and production capacities of the farms and the second to evaluate the market for produce within Auroville and how it might be better organised. As a result of that work the Farmgroup has taken several initiatives to improve both production and distribution. The most recent one is the setting up of 'Foodlink' which is a central collection and distribution center for all produce from Auroville farms. This is being developed together with a brand image for Auroville farm products and regular reports and information to the community about farming issues.

Two years ago the Farmgroup lost two farms to land exchange. It was felt that land in the centre of Auroville was at risk and that exchanging this land for land outside the central area was the only way of securing the land for Auroville. To create two new farms to make up for the ones lost and to help drive forward food security in the future the Farmgroup were asked to come up with a five year agricultural plan for Auroville. This has taken

longer than expected and is still in process, but the Farmgroup are very pleased that the community as a whole is taking our future food security seriously.