

# Auroville

Auroville is a planned city for up to 50,000 people from around the world under development in south-east India, located close to the Coromandel Coast some 10 kms north of Puducherry and 150 kms south of Chennai.

Aspects of Auroville can be found in other communities and projects around the world, but Auroville is the world's first and only internationally-recognised centre for research in human unity, which is also concerned with – and practically researching into – humanity's future cultural, environmental, social and spiritual needs. Its global importance is emphasised by the fact that it has been endorsed by UNESCO, and enjoys the full support and encouragement of the Government of India, its host nation, which has approved its Master Plan.

## History

The concept of an international-universal city devoted to an experiment in human unity originally sprang from the writings of India's great philosopher-yogi Sri Aurobindo. However, it was his French-born spiritual collaborator and co-worker Mirra Alfassa, known as The Mother, who first gave it more concrete form, by naming it 'Auroville' and stating:

*"Auroville wants 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. The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity."*

This was the first public statement on Auroville, given out in 1965. Next, in 1966, the concept of Auroville was put before the General Assembly of UNESCO by the Indian Government, and was unanimously endorsed. Two years later, on 28th February 1968, youth representing 124 nations and all the Indian States came together to inaugurate the township and receive its Charter, which reads as follows:

1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.
2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.
3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.
4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.

At the same time UNESCO repeated its unanimous endorsement of the project, and did so again in 1970 and 1983.

In 1988 the project was given special status by the Government of India, when the 'Auroville Foundation' was created by Act of Parliament. There are three separate but interacting bodies which make up the Foundation – a Governing Board with Secretary resident in Auroville, an International Advisory Council, and a Residents Assembly, the latter comprising all Aurovilians on the Master List of residents aged 18 or over.

The site chosen for Auroville was a severely eroded plateau extending eastwards to the sea. An early priority for the project was the environmental regeneration and reforestation of the area, which in the late 1960s had been officially described in a Government report as being in "an advanced state of desertification." Tens of thousands of trees and shrubs were planted (to date over 2 million) and erosion control begun, with the result that the area now has a green and widely forested landscape. Alongside this work, emphasis has always been placed on development of the city using non-polluting appropriate technology and sustainable energy generating systems.

## Auroville today

The Master Plan for the township, approved by the Government of India, is based on a spiral galaxy shape and incorporates four radiating sectors (the International, Cultural, Industrial and Residential Zones) plus a surrounding Green Belt. The four Zones have as their focus a huge 29m high x 36m diameter globe-shaped structure at the centre of the township called the Matrimandir, the 'soul of the city', a place for silent concentration which will be surrounded by an area of beautiful gardens.

The constantly expanding Auroville community today numbers over 2,200 residents from some 47 countries. They live in 100+ settlements of varying size and character, established on areas of Auroville land interspersed with village land over a total area of 20 square kilometres. They are engaged in diverse activities, in the fields of agriculture & green work, renewable energy, education, health care, village-outreach, construction, electronics, commerce, the arts and administration. All are volunteers who either receive a monthly basic 'maintenance' in local rupees, or pay for themselves partly or entirely from their own private resources as a contribution to the project.

General financing for Auroville comes from five sources – the Government of India and NGOs within India and abroad; 24 Auroville International Centres and Liaison Offices around the world; a percentage of the profits of Auroville's many commercial / business units; individual friends of Auroville within India and abroad; and substantially from the Aurovilians themselves.

## Auroville's significance and outreach

Auroville's work is not confined only to meeting the needs of the township, or to those of the wider bio-region. Auroville sees itself as a place of research and experimentation for humanity as a whole, not only into sustainable practices – such as in the fields of agriculture and energy generation – but more importantly into the establishment for the first time on earth of a society based on practical human unity applicable to all people and all nations. As such it is a unique and important experiment, role-model and potential catalyst for changing global perceptions, lifestyles and practices for the benefit of all humanity, independently of political, religious, ethnic or cultural influences.

Auroville has already gained national and international acclaim for its environmental work. Many hundreds of acres of forest cover have been created; indigenous flora and fauna have been re-introduced or have returned naturally; tree seedling nurseries have been established; and comprehensive soil and water conservation practices have been introduced. The development of ecologically-sound agriculture without the use of pesticides and detrimental chemicals, plus application of up-to-date agro-forestry techniques, is also being actively pursued.

Auroville has a well-organised waste recycling system, and is actively trying to raise awareness of the need to reduce and recycle waste throughout the whole Auroville area.

Alongside all this, Auroville's coordination of a major project to desilt and renovate the complex of artificial lakes (known locally as tanks) associated with the villages in the area, with the aim of improving their water holding capacity and helping to stabilise water tables, won a National Groundwater Augmentation Award. Auroville is also involved in raising awareness of the dangers of salt intrusion in the immediate coastal zone caused by over-pumping of ground water; is working with farmers' associations to identify and introduce less water-dependent agricultural practices; and is advising on and promoting the use of effective micro-organism (EM) technology.

The Centre for Scientific Research, an institution recognised and approved by the Government of India since 1984 for its development work in appropriate technology – in particular for its use of ferrocement technology for buildings – is another focal point for future-oriented activities, together with the Auroville Earth Institute (AEI). The latter is part of a national network of over 450 such centres initiated by the Housing and Urban Development Corporation of India (HUDCO). AEI provides regular training programmes, offers consultancy, designs buildings, supervises construction incorporating its own cost-effective compressed earth brick technology, and is headed by the representative for India & South Asia to the UNESCO Chair of Earthen Architecture. In 1992 it won the Hassan Fathy International Award for Architecture for the Poor; in 1995 it received an Outstanding Performance Award from HUDCO for its activities; and in 1994 and '95 it was recognised by India's Ministry of Urban Development as the Best Building Centre in India.

Another interesting institution is the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology (AIAT), a non-profit training school serving students from the local villages. The vision of the Institute is in line with the UN's Millennium Development Goals and is targeted at eradication of poverty and the socio-economic inequity among youth and families in disadvantaged coastal and rural communities in the bio-region, by raising the employability of youth of both genders and empowering them to contribute to India's economic growth by way of skill training and personal development.

The most recent major outreach work undertaken by Aurovilians has been overseeing the transformation of Pondicherry's Bharati Park, restoration of historical buildings in Tranquebar, and the restoration of Adyar Creek in Chennai into a healthy and environmentally sustainable nature reserve of great inspirational and educational value to the region. .

### **Education**

Auroville's multi-cultural educational system endeavours via its six schools to help each child to discover the inner self and realise her / his highest potential. It is increasingly based on a free choice system, which allows the children / students to choose their own subjects for study. Meanwhile, sports and physical education are also strongly encouraged for the balanced and healthy growth of the child, plus artistic training to develop aesthetic faculties.

In addition to the children of Auroville, some 700 children from the surrounding villages benefit from Auroville's educational programmes via another half dozen day or night schools established and overseen by Auroville.

### **Arts and culture**

There are regular film shows in Auroville, plus occasional theatre, music, dance and choir performances, poetry readings, exhibitions, powerpoint presentations, lectures, etc, normally free to residents and guests. 2011 also saw the second of the biennial AurovilleFilm Festival mounted in collaboration with schools in Auroville and its wider bioregion..

### **Health**

Together with allopathy and dentistry, provided for both Aurovilian and village patients, many systems of alternative primary health care are in use, including homeopathy, ayurveda, physiotherapy, acupuncture, massage and other therapies via various centres in the city. The Auroville Health Centre, equipped with basic medical facilities, serves the Auroville community and around 200 local patients daily via its main building and 7 village-located sub-centres. More than 30 local women health workers, trained by Auroville, are also active in 17 nearby villages, giving first-aid, advising on home cures, providing basic health education, and encouraging better nutrition by way of small family gardens in the villages.

The construction of a centrally located Integral Health Centre for Auroville is in process.

### **Commercial activities**

Some 125 commercial units and 70 service units operate in Auroville. The activities of the former include handicrafts, graphic design and printing, food processing, electronics and engineering, metalworking, windmill production, clothing and fashion, computer services, building construction and architecture.

These units, which contribute a third or more of their profits to the ongoing development of the township, have an important role to play in achieving eventual self-sufficiency for Auroville. Meanwhile, besides generating funds to assist the community in maintaining its basic services and infrastructure, the units also provide employment and training for large numbers of local villagers, enabling them to improve their standard of living and acquire valuable skills in a fair trade context. At present, some 4-to-5,000 local people are employed in Auroville, with considerable financial benefits to the surrounding area.

### **Organisation**

Bodies like the 'Auroville Council' and 'Working Committee' are elected every 4 years from volunteers willing to dedicate themselves to meeting the basic administrative needs of the township, but have no on-going power. Most major decisions, specially of a controversial nature, are taken at Residents Assembly or General Meetings, where all Aurovilians and Newcomers are equally free to express themselves. For the day to day running of the township, working groups pertaining to specific fields enjoy autonomy in their decision making.

### **Summary**

Auroville represents a real hope for the future of humanity, as the only place on earth where an ongoing non-political multi-national experiment in human unity is under way on behalf of all mankind, alongside other important work. The project has been steadily growing in size and scope for over 43 years now, and continues to do so with increasing momentum.

***For further information on Auroville please access the website [www.auroville.org](http://www.auroville.org) or contact: OutreachMedia, Multimedia Centre, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, INDIA; [outreachmedia@auroville.org.in](mailto:outreachmedia@auroville.org.in) (January 2012)***