Auroville: a neo-colonial phenomenon?

It happens from time to time that Westerners, and occasionally Indians, see Auroville as some sort of neo-colonial project.

They see the ammas working in the houses, the men working in gardens or at the Matrimandir, the masons, carpenters, drivers, watchmen or semi-skilled workshop staff employed around Auroville, and conclude that Auroville is like a throwback to the Raj, a project riddled with neo-colonial attitudes and behaviour patterns.

Are they right? Is there a neo-colonial dimension to Auroville?
Are Aurovilians actually just exploiting the local people for their own or Auroville's benefit?

To answer this question objectively, firstly one has to have a very clear picture of how India actually was under the Raj, how it was governed, and what life was like for its indigenous population. None of the people who make accusations of colonialism have ever had such experience, and so they lack objective knowledge.

Meanwhile there are a number of important points of comparison which can be made, as follows: Auroville is a project under the Government of India. The Auroville Foundation has an Indian Governing Board, Indian Secretary and Indian administrative staff, all of whom would be quick to protest or intervene if it was felt that Auroville was functioning like a throwback to colonial times or just taking advantage of the local people.

Colonialism was the prerogative of individual colonizing nations.

In Auroville today there are nearly 50 nations represented!

Far from milking the local economy for the advantage of a colonial nation, sending out raw materials, mineral resources, etc, for the benefit of that nation or a group of nations, over the years Auroville has been channeling millions of dollars from abroad into the bio-region. Local people freely and voluntarily approach Auroville for work: there are no forces of coercion or recruitment involved.

Meanwhile Auroville pays good salaries and provides decent working conditions plus pension schemes and other advantages i.e. there is no attempt to take advantage of local people or get away with the minimum wage for maximum amount of labour.

While it is possible to place well-qualified local people in jobs where they work on computers, in accounting, in various clerical, supervisory or managerial positions, it is not possible to place everyone in such positions. This means that illiterate or unskilled people can only be employed in jobs they are capable of performing, just as happens everywhere else in the world i.e. a cleaner or gardener is only doing that work because s/he lacks the needed skills to perform more demanding work.
This is a normal reality of human life worldwide, and not an indication of “colonialism”. Strong evidence of the positive effect of Auroville on the local villages can be seen by comparison with other villages further afield. Even as close as 20-30 kms away one can see relatively less prosperity and much simpler lifestyles. It should be noted that a considerable number of Auroville employers are Indians. They also employ local people in just the same way as Westerners, and treat them in the same way. There are numerous friendships, close working relationships of mutual respect, and quite a number of mixed-race marriages or partnerships between Indian people and Westerners.

Most of those who criticise Auroville for being "colonialist" are visiting Westerners, because it is they who have inherited a conscience stemming from the original colonial period, and are very sensitive to the subject. Auroville has no elitist clubs, like the Gymkhana in Delhi or Adyar in Chennai. There is no general policy of separation or exclusion between local Indians and the Aurovilians. All mix easily together in a relaxed and relatively harmonious way. Most Auroville events, specially cultural events like the pre-dawn bonfires, theatrical and dance performances, films, exhibitions, etc, are freely accessible to local people.

Auroville is doing practical work to improve infrastructure and life in the villages through bodies like Palmyra, AV Village Action Group, the AV Health Centre and Dental Clinic, Water Harvest, Auroville Clean and SAIIER, providing toilets, schools, health sub-centres, dental clinics, (water) tank rehabilitation programmes, sports facilities, youth clubs, etc.

There is a conscious all-pervasive wish in Auroville to see the local villages come up alongside Auroville, and this is definitely - though slowly - happening, as anyone who has witnessed the changes wrought over the last 40+ years will confirm. Auroville has reforested - not deforested - the area; has not exploited any local material resources for its exclusive benefit; and is sharing its growth and development with the local people as best it can with the limited funds available.

Far from being in a position of control, Aurovilians are actually very vulnerable, always at the mercy of the Indian authorities, who can expel them individually any time they wish, should they decide to do so. There is no way that foreign Aurovilians could afford to live out any sort of colonial fantasy here, even if they wished to do so, which is definitely not the case. To summarise: Auroville is Indian territory, Indian controlled under the Government of India, and cannot even remotely be compared with the Raj. It is a unique project, something new in creation and definitely not a throw-back to the past. Rather, it is a hope for the future of all humanity!