

THE HINDU

PUDUCHERRY

Remaining COVID-free, the Auroville way

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Auroville closed its gates to visitors since March 25 and continues to remain shut

An unflagging spirit of volunteerism and a self-sustaining mode of life seems to have helped Auroville maintain a track record of zero COVID-19 cases in its global community of over 2,500 members from 54 countries.

In fact, during a period when the novel coronavirus was silently spreading across the world, Auroville, a popular destination on the bucket-list of travellers to the southern part of the country, had received an estimated 10,000 tourists from all corners of the world in January and February. Besides, over 50 Aurovilians on work-related or personal visits abroad, had returned to the universal township in February-March.

Auroville had closed its gates to visitors when the nation-wide lockdown took effect on March 25, and continues to remain shut.

Diligent adherence

Since then, there has been diligent adherence to prevention be it respecting inter-personal distance, preparing baskets for people in quarantine or for the elders of the community, delivering food, or sanitising the groceries shop/crates. The success can as much be owed to the 25-day quarantine adopted by those who returned from abroad.

The threat of COVID-19 may have upended life in the peaceful environs of the universal township but it hardly dented the spirit of volunteerism among the young and old in Auroville. Every day of the lockdown, teams of over 200 volunteers have stepped up to help organise life in Auroville during the challenging time under the supervision of the Auroville COVID task force, an Aurovilian said. Jef who works at Square Dot, a subdivision of Prakrit in Center for Scientific Research and is currently designing an affordable demountable house, took on the task of cleaning the grocery outlet “Pour Tous” and sanitising it every day. There is Laura, who works at the Auroville Library, Moussami a Matrimandir volunteer and young residents like Auroshree who have been part of the sanitising army. “We’ve been sanitising like crazy all through this lockdown,” said Fabienne at Auroville’s Outreach Media unit.

Foodlink, a unit in Auroville, managed the supply chain of commodities from organic farms in the township. “We did source some supplies from Puducherry as we don’t produce just about enough to sustain the entire family,” she said.

Popular hangouts like the Dreamers Cafe re-opened in April with only takeaways. At the community kitchen system, food for 1,000 people is cooked at the solar kitchen. Food was delivered to people at home obviating need for anyone to step out of their homes. Since March, immunity-boosting ingredients that prevent infection were integrated into the solar kitchen menu.

Everyone with a travel history was put in a 28 day quarantine and was screened at least twice even though he/she had not developed any symptoms before getting clearance out of quarantine. Auroville had five people who fit the category (two Aurovilians and three guests) and were tested for COVID-19. All of them came out negative.

Auroville has also faced some skepticism on its low testing numbers. However, Aurovilians point out that the testing criteria is determined nationally and adopted at the local level. In the case of a young Aurovilian who had returned from Italy in March, the Block Medical Officer recommended a RT-PCR only to be overruled by Jimpmer doctors after screening.

According to S. Siddhartha, Deputy Director Health, Villupuram, due to a large number of foreign tourists and people from other countries living here, there was a natural concern about Auroville in the wake of the pandemic scare. The department had organised a camp and screened people. People who had travelled or had external contacts were quarantined. The people here have observed instructions and as a result, there is not a single case of infection, he said.