

Synopsis:

AUROVILLE: Utopia in transition

Photographic documentary by

Benjamin LARDERET

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For the past half-century, the ecological innovations of this “Ideal City” have embodied tangible efforts in terms of man’s adaptation to his environment.

Auroville is an ecological and spiritual utopia, set up in February 1968 in Southern India, in a region where the indigenous dry tropical forest had almost disappeared since the colonial era. Forty years later, Auroville is a thriving, green oasis. A couple was at the origin of this “tangible utopia”: Sri Aurobindo, an Indian philosopher and supporter of independence, and “The Mother”, a French woman, protagonist of cosmic love, who sought to perpetuate the message initiated by her mentor and husband, deceased in 1950.

Neither eco-village, nor high-class tourist resort, Auroville is more of an environmental laboratory and a place for trying out new forms of community life. The residents come from many different countries, mostly from India and from the West. One thing strikes everyone arriving here: the forest, an essential carbon pit and refuge for biodiversity, totally absent in the surrounding area, seems to have flourished in the last forty years. Like other initiatives throughout the world, (1) the experiment here shows yet again, that in a relatively short space of time, with few means but much will power, it is possible to rehabilitate arid and impoverished ground and to revive many native species. It is a virtuous circle that needs practically no investment, but a minimum of manual labour. It contributes to local food safety and boosts the level in the water table.

The water cycle, another major problem in India, due to the lack of any treatment of waste water, open sewers and contaminated ground water, is the object of a specific approach at Auroville. The first task was to force the water to penetrate the earth, especially during the abundantly rainy season. By building multiple little dykes, creating temporary ponds and reservoirs, they were able to stop the flow of surface water, hence preventing soil erosion and limiting the amount of water flowing off into the sea. According to the *Sadhana Forest* community (specialised in reforestation), these multiple micro-infrastructures should bring the level of ground water up by six metres within the next ten years (2). Once the earth is saturated with water, pollenisation allows local species to recolonise the land naturally. Of course this helps the teams working to reforest the area. *Sadhana Forest* has accumulated precious experience over the past ten years, leading to the establishment of two other communities, one in Kenya, the other in Haiti.

A specific procedure using very little water has been developed for the transfer of plants from the nursery to areas designated for reforestation which have become inhospitable for endemic species.

Several communities work on the themes of reforestation and biodiversity, including a botanic garden, and there are also many organic farmers, some of whom using the principles of “permaculture”. This is quite a complex concept to put in place. The idea is to recreate an ecosystem with the best adapted self-sufficient plants, identified after in-depth study of the terrain. Generally applied to small lots, this technique gives a better yield than other forms of culture. The diversity necessary for the balance of the ecosystem is beneficial for local plant and animal life.

At Auroville, there are seventeen organic farms of widely different sizes, using different agricultural techniques, but they cover only 15% of the needs of the more than 2500 residents. This result, plainly inadequate to ensure complete self-sufficiency, is being studied to see how it can be improved.

However Auroville’s treatment of energy can boast of a much better performance. The Solar Kitchen, the main collective restaurant, (residents can dine there for free) serves 1000 main meals daily, cooked using solar energy, thanks to a 15-metre wide solar oven. Like in many developing countries, hot water for houses is also produced by solar heaters. Any other requirements for electricity are covered by solar panels on buildings that are not connected to the grid, or by a wind turbine financed by donations from abroad. Auroville is thus self-sufficient for energy. Self-sufficient but frugal, because there is no point in converting people to renewable energy if they don’t pay attention to their energy consumption.

To this end the Earth Institute works to promote construction using un-stoved bricks. The compression and stabilisation of these bricks in conjunction with cement mean that the normal final step of stove-curing can be avoided, so saving three-quarters of the energy normally used to produce bricks. In this way cheap and renewable construction materials can be supplied to the poor, as well as to developing countries. The Earth Institute initiated a “technology transfer” with organisations working on reconstruction in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake there.

Most of these environmental initiatives could be considered as “*jugaad*” innovations. *Jugaad* is a term in Hindi meaning muddling by, or finding smart solutions with limited means, using whatever comes to hand. The major advantage of this concept, as proved in an Indian context at Auroville, is that it can be applied in any developing country, anywhere in the world. The ecological revolution therefore is no longer the preserve of rich countries, and it contributes to the improvement of the quality of life in those communities where it is applied.

Benjamin Larderet

- (1) See the *Instituto Terra* (the farm belonging to the photographer Sebastiao Salgado), and the agro-forestry bringing greenery back to Burkina Faso having spread from Mali (*Manière de Voir* N°136 Article “*L’Heureux hasard qui a fait reverdir le Sahel*” / “The stroke of good luck bringing greenery back to the Sahel”
- (2) Up to 17 metres in certain parts of the Sahel, 5 metres on average (same article as above)