Assessing the value of Auroville’s farms

For an outside observer, Auroville’s farms are a complex and extraordinarily diverse world that seems to pose challenges to understanding, interpreting, classifying, monitoring and evaluating.

On one hand, Auroville’s farmers seem to share many of the problems besetting small farmers all over India and the world. On the other, there is outstanding work being done with devotion and pioneering spirit that justifies Auroville’s reputation as a hub of innovation, education and inspiration.

It is important for Auroville to keep evaluating all its activities, and farming is no exception. In the old paradigm, of which we are witnessing the rapid dissolution in this turbulent time for our planet, the bottom line for assessing anything used to be its economic aspect, money. While we are in transition towards something new and yet unknown, it is crucial to identify parameters for assessment that give us an idea of the real value of what is being done, where we are doing well and where improvement is needed.

The following is not a systematic frame for assessing the ‘value’ or the performance of Auroville’s farms. It is a humble attempt at presenting some important aspects of farming in Auroville, some of its achievements, struggles, strengths and weaknesses. If these pointers can contribute to a greater understanding, allowing us in turn to work together towards a better future, it will have served its purpose.

Tending the land, healing the soil

One of the most pressing global challenges is the dramatic loss of fertility of agricultural land. We’re all aware of Sadguru’s world tour promoting the ‘Save the Soil’ campaign. When Auroville was founded 50+ years ago, most of its soil was marginal and severely eroded, making farming an arduous challenge. After decades of patient soil regeneration work, life has returned; the forests are a great success, and the farms are in much improved condition. Even today, increasing soil fertility remains a constant effort, and it will be some time before we can speak of naturally abundant farming.
Our local soil conditions vary greatly from farm to farm, from the heavy clay soils of Annapurna, Auroville’s main rice growing farm, to arid sand and pebble soils, and flood-prone areas where farming requires specialised skill and heroic patience, as well as some re-landscaping to mitigate the risk of flood damage.

Much of a farmer’s work is today environmental healing and stewardship. This is the reason why in certain areas of Switzerland, farmers are paid for looking after the land irrespective of whether they grow crops or not.

**The real value of healthy food and land**

Our farmers often hear criticism that their produce is too expensive, and/or isn’t picture-perfect. Why can’t they ‘compete’ with the food from Pondy market?

Most people aren’t aware of the vast difference with ‘outside’ produce, which tends to be

- nutritionally depleted and pesticide-ridden
- industrially grown (large-scale farming)
- contributing to ecological degradation
- socio-economically exploitative and unsustainable
- kept artificially cheap through subsidies

Insufficient awareness of these facts, or the absence of a conscious choice and active policy in favour of sustainable food production, puts Auroville farmers at a serious disadvantage.

**In need of greater support**

Due to the situation described above, Auroville’s farmers are struggling in multiple ways, not so differently from small farmers in the rest of India and around the globe. A skewed and unsustainable economy, shortage of labour, environmental degradation, climate change, and financial scarcity are among the main factors that make farming a challenge and a sacrifice.

Auroville is offering some minimal basic support to its farms in form of ‘maintenance’ and small loans. This avoids the most extreme vulnerability which has tragically driven three lakhs of India’s farmers to commit suicide within a decade. And yet in Auroville too, many of our farmers are indebted, and are barely managing to keep up the status quo, with little or no chance of being able to finance simple improvements on the farms.

So far Auroville has not been able to completely reverse within its microcosm the global malaise that relegates farmers to a precarious, marginal existence. Transforming this situation will require not just some cash injection into the farms, but a deep shift in the collective awareness and a transformation of Auroville’s internal economy, particularly food distribution and consumption. This can only be achieved through a combination of far-sighted planning, grassroots education, and active community participation.
A detailed survey and analysis of Auroville’s farms was conducted in 2004 which still holds surprisingly true in its conclusions and recommendations. It should be a must-read as a basis for any planning, along with closely consulting the farmers, distributors and ‘consumers’, possibly forming task teams for planning the way forward.

A treasury of research, experience, and education

Since its very beginning, Auroville has attracted many idealistic farmers who adopted its impoverished soil for a vast diversity of organic and regenerative farming methods. The experience accumulated through countless initiatives and experiments is immense. Unfortunately only a small part of it has been documented to date. A systematic gathering of this knowledge will be important; it will not only benefit the active farmers who too often work in relative isolation, but also greatly enhance Auroville’s educational and training activities in the field. At present these are mostly happening informally (through volunteering on several farms), but they could have a much wider reach and dimension. The Sustainable Livelihood Institute (SLI) is one such initiative (started in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu government); with due support, the richness of Auroville’s experience could be shared through a multitude of channels.

Some of Auroville’s farmers are engaged in applied research, networking and policy making. Annapurna, South India’s first organic dairy farm, helped to set the national standards, and Dr Lucas, secretary of the Biodynamic Association of India, has built up EcoPro with its vast educational outreach in the use of EM (micro-organisms) for farming and sanitation.

On a side note, it takes many years for a farmer to get to know his farm with its unique topography, soil conditions, microclimate, flora and fauna, and to learn to work with it optimally. Needless to say that cutting up the spatial integrity of established farms and/or rotating their farmers every few years would amount to wasting the knowhow, experience and practical work done on a farm, would be disruptive in every respect and go against all laws natural or spiritual.

Publications and awards

Several of Auroville’s busy farmers have authored books and major articles. Some examples are Bernard, who initiated Tamil Nadu’s iconic Nammalwar to organic farming many years ago (‘Farming in Transition’), and Deepika, recipient of the Nari Shakti Puraskar, India’s highest civilian award for women (‘Reviving Vegetable Diversity – a Seed Savour’s Guide’), Priya of Buddha Garden (who has written several educational books for children and grown-ups, the latest on organic Cashew cultivation), and Anshul of Auro Orchard (‘A Small Farm in the Mountains’ and ‘After School Integrated Farming’). Annapurna farm publishes since decades a newsletter with in-depth insights. Several of Auroville’s farms have their own websites, and educational videos are published on youtube, such as ‘Solitude’ Krishna’s whose much-loved permaculture channel (in English and Tamil) has risen to stardom with lakhs of followers.
Farmer-authors-teachers: Bernard and Deepika, the pioneering founders of Pebble Garden; Priya of Buddha Garden; Krishna of Solitude permaculture farm.

In summary: Some pointers for assessment and planning:

**Vital food security:** Times like Covid with its lockdowns have highlighted the importance of growing food locally in order to maintain basic supplies in emergency situations. The aspect of food security must be not only preserved but urgently enhanced.

**Nutritional value:** If farm produce was priced on the basis of its nutritional ingredients (instead of weight and looks), Auroville-grown food would ceased to be considered ‘expensive’, and be recognised as exceptional value for money!

**Environment, land and water:** What is the impact and real cost of farming? If there was a tax for ecological damage, and a reward for preserving healthy land and water for present and coming generations, Auroville farms would be doing outstandingly well!

**Footprint, food miles, packaging:** The post-harvest footprint (of storage, packaging, transport etc) and its real cost is not factored into the price of industrially grown produce. Through eating local and seasonal these significant factors contributing to global warming can be vastly reduced or altogether avoided.

**‘Small farms are the future’**: The FAO has concluded that small scale farming, and not agro-industries, are the sustainable way forward. 2019-2928 has been declared by the United Nations the ‘decade of family farming’. Auroville’s potential is to develop and optimise collaboration between its diverse small farms.

**Research, education, community involvement, and Auroville’s purpose:** As emphasised by Mother, Auroville is meant for experiments, for unending research and learning, for drawing on the best of the past to make it a springing board for future discoveries and realisations, for developing new forms of sharing our existence in solidarity and oneness. Auroville’s farms are a natural and important ground not only for Karma Yoga, but indeed for embodying all of these aspects that Mother has given to Auroville as its very raison d’être.

A careful and enlightened assessment, a greater involvement of the community at large in farms and community kitchens, education and conscious consumption, and giving farms the priority they should have in any healthy society, will mark a great progress not just materially but at all levels of our shared existence.

Additional references

Besides the books and media mentioned in the text itself, and the innumerable inspiring sources, traditional and cutting-edge, that help guiding Auroville’s farms in their development, the following books are warmly recommended:

- **Tending our Land – a New Story**, by MG Jackson and Nyla Coelho, India 2016.
- **The One-Straw Revolution** – by Masanobu Fukuoka, 1975.

Auroville, July 2022