

IN THE MID-SIXTIES

(*Dayanand recollects the practical difficulties of the early years.*)

MI, Feb. 2008, pp. 120-22.

The main activity in Auroville in the mid-sixties was only a hectic and endless identification of land needed by poring over maps, locating the owner of the land, entering into long and endless discussions with them to part with the land. Getting the FMBs (Field Measurement Books) was another Herculean task, locating the land on the ground was another. After finalisation of the land deal, registration of documents was one more tedious process, and finally, the payment. Since most of the villagers were illiterate and did not have bank accounts or had even heard of banks, they wanted all the money in cash. To count and re-count and finally obtain a receipt was another task. Most difficult was taking possession of the land purchased. It had to be surveyed, boundaries identified, and stones laid to demarcate the property. There were long disputes with the neighbours to settle this. Like this, there were over 1,116 documents registered and 2,400 acres of land taken possession of and taken care of.

Then started the numbering of thousands of trees. Several thousand palm trees (*nungu*), thousands of cashew trees, mango, jackfruit, guava, *nelli*, *sitaphal*, etc. These had to be guarded round the clock, fruit collected, and since there were few Aurovilians, the produce was brought to the Ashram Dining Room or the Corner House¹.

The land area had been used until then by the famers for dry cultivation, that is raising short-term crops with the help of the North-East monsoon. Between July and March, three such crops could be raised by inter-cultivation. As far as I remember, no one from the villages even touched our trees or tried to cut them. They were permitted to collect dry and dead wood free.

We also started a massive Famers' Education and Training programme to modernise and update the farmers on advanced techniques and use of high-yielding varieties. This covered all the villages in Auroville and beyond in Vanur taluk. Over a period of 6 to 7 years, we had trained over 15,000 small farmers, farm women and labourers in the area. We took many of them on tours to modern farms and universities and gave radio sets to each group of men and women so that they could listen to the Farmers' Programme in the evening.²

Cultivation of cash crops on the seashore in Kalapet was undertaken in a 20 acre plot (Ganapathy Chettikulam).³ Seawater of different concentrations was used for germination, and the seedlings were planted in several replications of fertilisers. The results of the research were submitted to ICAR (Indian Council of Agricultural Research), the funding agency. How to collect water from the sea and take it to the research plot was the main problem, not the raising of plants. The motor for drawing water from the sea was the only ridiculous way and we found the motor always missing due to the action of the tides or unworkable due to corrosion. All these were interesting challenges and we met them.⁴

At that time, there were controversial opinions on the use of organic fertilisers. The basically organic Indian farmer had by now been converted to a businessman and he wanted maximum returns in the shortest time. So the use of fertilisers began. Raoul Mercier, working in Auro-

¹ GG's note: The canteen of the SAICE.

² GG's note: Excerpt from the April 1971 issue of the SAS Information Letter: "The *Freedom from Hunger* campaign: A scheme for training and education of farmers has been started. Initially Auro-Orchard will be treated as a nucleus farm and extension work will be done in ten villages around the farm. This intensive programme includes selection of farmers from each village and raising crops for them under the best agricultural conditions, taking farmers on educational tours, arranging radio talks and conducting short, intensive courses of education, theoretical and practical, in the nucleus farm."

³ GG's note: The place is now known as "Eternity".

⁴ GG's note: Excerpt from the January 1971 issue of the SAS Information Letter: "The Saline Water Irrigation Research Project sanctioned by the Govt. of India has been set up at Kanakchettikullam. Experiments are in progress. The object is to find out the best dosage of sea water for the growth of plant and to study the change in their metabolism and their absorption spectra."

Orchard, was a saintly organic farmer opposed to fertiliser usage. So the matter was referred to the Mother. She vehemently opposed the use of fertilisers. “No, No, No,” she said to fertilisers.⁵

In those days, I used to go alone, by jeep, from my residence in Pondy to Auroville via Bommaipalayam, the best road, I thought, driving carefully between the cart ruts. Once, near Two Banyans, the jeep got stuck in the so-called wilderness and there was no one in sight to call for help. I was looking around and pondering on the next step when suddenly three boys stepped out of the cashew grove and voluntarily dug up the edge and lifted the jeep out of the rut. A god send, I felt, helping hands there were from nowhere.

It was the early days of Auroville’s administration getting organised and there were many criss-cross decisions of the administration. The Mother had placed me in charge of all purchases and payments with the definitive order of 12.9.67. Regarding a purchase that was made, she sent me a note in this context as follows:

Dayanand,

A week ago I have said that all purchases and payments should be made by and through you.

I have even written a paper to that effect.

I hope this purchase has not been made afterwards.

It was in those early days that the Mother decided to form the first and only Auroville Administrative Committee, perhaps in 1967.⁶ It used to meet every Sunday in the then Auroville office adjacent to the Ashram Centre of Education. The committee consisted of Navajata, Laljibhai Hindocha, Suresh Hindocha, Roger Anger, André Morisset, Anjani and Dayanand, with Wil as secretary. Navajata conducted the meetings; the minutes were recorded and shown to the Mother who was the chairperson of the Committee. She corrected and approved the minutes of each meeting. Perhaps the record of all the proceedings must be available with the Auroville Archives.

The Committee was dissolved after it functioned for about four years.

The first colony to be constructed was ‘Aspiration’ at Kuilapalayam village which was a large grove of big tamarind trees. Along with the colony, came up Vincenzo’s workshop, adjacent to the handmade paper manufacturing unit. One day, there was a fire in the workshop which practically destroyed it.⁷ When the matter was referred to the Mother, she said it was essentially due to disharmony in the atmosphere that the accident occurred.⁸

There were interesting exchanges between the Mother and me on various aspects.

Some of them were:

- Regarding the procedure to organise the collection of cashew seeds efficiently, whether the work may be leased out to an outsider, the Mother replied, “It would be better to find among the people of Auroville, some who will be happy to do this work.”⁹
- I wrote to the Mother, “How does one take decisions based on Truth in action? I intensely aspire for this in my dealings, specially with the people who live in Auroville. How to know what is the Truth in each case? For example, one villager had agreed to collect and give us 13 bags of cashew nuts during this season (69-70). Now due to drought, he says he can give only 5 bags. It is true there has been drought in the area. Mental and visual assessments are not infallible. How to assess correctly?” The Mother

⁵ GG’s note: This was in March 1971.

⁶ GG’s note: The first meeting of the CAA was held on 15.3.70. Mother suspended it in February 1971.

⁷ GG’s note: This fire erupted in the evening of 7.3.72.

⁸ GG’s note: On 9.3.72, Mother told Shyam Sunder: “The atmosphere there was so bad that my protection which is there was ineffective. But it was a big blow.”

⁹ GG’s note: Mother’s answer to Dayanand’s question is dated 28.12.68.

replied, “The thing is false from the beginning. How can the man promise to give a fixed number of bags when he does not know how many he shall get?”¹⁰

- It was proposed to start a transport unit, I prayed to the Mother to give a name. This is what she wrote: “Aurotransport”.¹¹

But the laying of the Foundation stone on 28 February 1968 was the most transfiguring moment, when I look back. A mighty crowd of thousands had gathered for a very solemn ceremony of placing in the um earth from each country. There seemed to fall a hush and peace on the whole area and the Mother’s voice was heard loud and clear.

An eternal moment in history, indeed.

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¹⁰ GG’s note: The answer to Dayanand’s question is dated 6.5.69 and there are two more sentences: “And how will you know that he gives exactly what he gets when there is no supervision of the harvesting? So now, you have only to do for the best with justice and knowledge.”

¹¹ GG’s note: Name given by Mother at Dayanand’s request on: 25.2.69.