

The Historical Survey

From the Dawn of Auroville

Introduction

Farming in Auroville (AV) began in 1969, at the very beginning of the community itself. Some debate has arisen about whether farming was intended, or needs be, an integral part of the Auroville vision. It is obvious through the Mother's purchase of farms in the early to mid 1960's with the intention of using these farms for the Auroville community, that the original vision of Auroville included farming in its framework.

The vision for agriculture included not only farms, orchards, dairies and nurseries but also a Directorate of Agriculture and an agricultural polytechnic (The Dawning of Auroville, pg 25).

When asked about the use of conventional chemicals as a tool for cultivation in AV the Mother responded, "Auroville should not fall back into old errors, which belong to a past that is trying to survive" (The Auroville Adventure: "Farming in Auroville", pg 8). As such, the community and its farmers have taken the initiative to work the land in a fashion that utilizes ecologically friendly tools in order to preserve the wealth and balance of Mother Nature. The farms have always carried the main intention to, as much as possible, produce for the consumption of the community itself with an equal support coming from the community to the farms.

Throughout this historical assessment, there has been no indication that any further outline, organization or planning for agriculture existed in the original vision for AV.

The Farms

The Early Years

It seems that in the very beginning most AV residents were involved in food production out of necessity; a trend that would occur again in the late seventies when the Sri Aurobindo Society withdrew its financial support for AV. This work included the operation of the farms and various kitchen gardens throughout the community (Auroville: The First Six Years, pg. 50). However, two communities that were involved strictly in agriculture and producing food directly for the community: AuroOrchard and Annapurna. The Mother purchased these farms before the inauguration of AV, with 60 acres at AuroOrchard being obtained in 1964. In 1969, Mother appointed Gerard as the general manager. Gerard was helped in the early days by a man called Mercier, who had a lot of experience with organic farming in Africa. However, he left in around 1974. After this Biti, a Bengali woman from the ashram came to the Orchard to work with Gerard and she is still there.

The 135 acres of Annapurna were also purchased early on and the farm, which was heavy black cotton soil. Of this land 25 acres were wasteland and 15 acres degraded by salinisation. In addition to a number of other ashram farms, Annapurna was originally managed by an ashramite named Duyman. Annapurna was farmed and managed by Ashok from Andhra Pradesh for six or seven years in the seventies. He came from a rich farming family and brought workers and materials from there to farm the land. As far as memories serve, all this ended around 1978. The farm, sat unproductive until about 1987(Nov 1986), when Tomas took over care of the land, after moving from Kottakarai Farm.

Service Farm, with its sandy red soil, was also one of the original acquisitions by the Mother for AV. In the early days, AV also had a dairy, which was originally based in Aspiration but was moved to Service Farm in 1971 (Aurobrindavan). Service Farm was originally much bigger and cultivated field crops; a person called Bhoomi managed it. In 1990, Mechtild took over management of Service Farm and began planting a variety of fruit trees as well as developing the fruit trees which had already been planted.

There was also another farm in the area of Service Farm of around 14 acres, managed by Rajan, and cultivated Guavas, Mangoes and field crops. This farm was situated closer towards Pondicherry and stopped functioning in the mid-eighties. The land was sold sometime in the early nineties.

Despite the Mothers original intentions for farming in Auroville, the early farms were all situated either outside of Auroville or on the very edge. In addition, all used chemical inputs, as per the local farmers. It was only during the eighties when organic farming began to be taken more seriously and farming as a whole began to take place largely within the greenbelt.

During the first few years of AV, Kottakarai evolved as a centre of food production, starting as a vegetable garden and building up to include grains and fruits as well. Jaap originally managed Kottakarai farm. However, after Jaap left for a stay in Holland, Tomas managed the place along with two Germans (Tom and Robert). The farm was pulled apart during this period because a number of Aurovillians did not want a farm there as it was situated in the industrial zone. After Tomas left, management of Kottakarai shifted to Shankar with 7 workers. Robert had separated the orchard. Kottakarai was producing milk, eggs, seasonal fruits and vegetables, rice, kambu, varaghu, ulundu, sesame and peanuts.

Discipline Farm saw Joster leave in 1989 and Jeff take over responsibility of the farm maintaining its delivery of milk, bananas, coconuts, eggs, seasonal fruits and vegetables and keet. Djaima was still being operated by Jean, a Tamil Aurovillian, and five workers. They produced mainly tomatoes and other seasonal vegetables along with milk, peanuts, ragi and ulundu.

Revelation was being managed by Herve, Sigrid(Sigrid was there only for a few years), and 7 workers, both left Revelation at the end of the eighties. They were producing, eggs, seasonal fruits and vegetables, sesame, ulundu, varaghu, peanuts, silm cotton for Auroville. As the farms carried on with their operations, the idea of food and self-sufficiency seems to have left the sphere of public discourse during these years.

Utility started in 1971 including a papaya plantation. Originally, all the produce of these farms was delivered to the Central Food Distribution centre.

All these farms mentioned above produced considerable amounts of food for Auroville and none of them was fully organic.

As AV began to find its feet, so agriculture began to establish itself in a more formal manner. In 1972, Fertile was established, farming a half-acre vegetable garden, interspersed with 60 mixed fruit trees and one cow. By 1973, it was already expanding to include more fruit trees. The farm continued to expand, growing from the original 2.5-acre nucleus, to 55 acres by 1974(I do not think that the farm expanded so much; it became pretty much a forest with some farming activities). Also in this time Success, was being farmed as an orchard, and expanded to include field crops such as ragi, peanut, gram, and sesame.

Pitchandikulam, Aurogreen and Two Banyans all started in 1973. Aurogreen, which included Nilatangam, consisted of 50 acres on the northeast side of the city in the Greenbelt, 30 acres of which were purchased by Charlie who has been responsible for the development and management of Aurogreen since its beginning. Charlie was alone in his management of Aurogreen with fifteen Tamil workers. Though he was suffering from a lack of assistance, Aurogreen was producing substantial quantities of milk, cheese, eggs and fruits for AV.

Two Banyans had four acres of fruit and forest trees, a vegetable garden and small fields of ragi and gram. Discipline farm started in 1976 with 10 acres of un-irrigated land. The whole farm was financed from the resources of the three Aurovillians. During this time, the farm did not make any profit.

The nineties and onwards

Kottakarai had seen yet another change in management with Kumar and Ross overseeing the cultivation of rice, millet, pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables on the sandy but good quality soil. Jeff was hoping to expand the 19 acres at Discipline, 7.5 acres of which were being cropped, by purchasing 6.5 acres of adjacent farmland. He was also seeking investment to upgrade the farm's irrigation facilities. Mechtild was working on expanding Service Farm planning for the cultivation of vegetables and medicinal herbs, but still waiting for a return of the investments on her young fruit trees. Kumar and Kala were caring for the 10 acres of farmland at Djaima with hopes of attaining self-sufficiency by adding a 200-bird poultry section and expanding the dairy while maintaining the vegetable garden and orchard. Annapurna, the largest farm in Auroville, was only cultivating 15 acres of dry land crops such as millet and rice. Aurogreen and AuroOrchard maintained their operations with relative success although by this time AuroOrchard and Aurogreen began to feel choking financial constraints relating to the cost of labour and the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board's decision to charge AV farmers for the electricity used for irrigation pumping.

According to the article, "Farming in Auroville," published in "The Auroville Adventure"; by 1995 Revelation farm had fallen into a deteriorated condition. There were plans, however, by Cristo to revitalize the farm, with the help of Herbert from Anusuya, using the existing infrastructure to plant three and a half acres of field crops.

1995 also saw a new farm begin to develop with Krishna at solitude bringing 5 acres of land under cultivation and joining the AVFG. Herbert began to purchase the land necessary for the farm he envisioned settling called Siddharta. I do not think Herbert purchased any land; he just settled on the land which was purchased and dreamt of a big farm to develop. One of the reasons he moved there was that the lands he used to cultivate were becoming the residential zone, so he ran out of fields....ironic that he is again running out of land; probably karma or so.....

This is the history that has been pieced together in regards to where farming was being done, who was doing it and what they were growing. There are still many holes in regards to: why these different farms and settlements have fluctuated in their participation in food production, and exact dates are lacking, as many of the changes have been more like transitions over time.

Institutional development

The year 1978 witnessed the first attempt at formal organization of the farms in AV. This organization came in the form of the Food Growing Cooperative. The cooperative consisted of thirteen farms.

Revelation was started on six acres of red laterite land in 1980 by a Frenchman called Herve, with a dairy, poultry section, orchard, vegetable garden and dry land crops. Outside the Food Growing Cooperative there were many settlements that began growing food on a surplus scale. Some of these were short lived, but for the period were a very important part of food production in AV. These settlements included Angira Gardens, Horizons and Transformation. Though small the land from these areas were being quite productive yielding crops of ragi, ulundu and various fruits and vegetables common to the bioregion.

Organization continued to dominate farming in Auroville during the late seventies as finances were constantly pressing on the minds of Aurovillians. These pressures led to the birth of the Food Growing Cooperative in August 1979, the first attempt at coordinating the actions of the farms of AV. Linking the farms together would not only create a support network, but also make it easier to relate produce from the farms to the needs of the community. The cooperative was composed of individuals and settlements involved in food production for the community. In all 13 settlements were represented in the organization. “As part of an overall reorganization of Auroville finances, the Food Cooperative established priorities for the different units, saw more clearly how money was being spent, and attempted to co-ordinate more effectively what crops were being grown in relation to Auroville real needs.” (AVR #5 Fall 1981).

There was a very considerable increase in recorded information during the time of the Food Growing Cooperative. The group collected production data and disseminated it to the community. The group, however, was short lived and by 1983 was in the process of disintegrating, leaving the farms to again operate on an individual basis.

It would take a decade after the disintegration of the Food Growing Cooperative for the farms of AV to organize them on a large scale again in the form of the Farm Group. Little other information is available for this period except for the work done by Sigrid in 1988 in regards to the individual farm profiles that she wrote for the AV News. It was a time of transitions.

During the eighties Auroville started to grow and became more urban, and the kind of people that came also were different; in the early years the inflow of people was dominated by the young pioneering types, these were now joined by more established and much richer people.

This leads to the “contemporary” history of Auroville farms with the advent of the Auroville Farm Group (AVFG). In 1994, the farmers decided to make an effort to coordinate themselves again in order to face the problems becoming apparent in their operations. Cheap and abundant food from Pondicherry was out-competing the produce from Auroville farms even though it was clear this outside food was produced in a way that went against the Auroville vision. Apathy was present about the organic nature of food and the economic needs and security of Auroville farms.

Carel and Tomas, who did some kind of farm assessment, took the initiative for this new farm group. They designed a questionnaire, which was filled out with each farmer. In response, almost all of the farmers of AV joined the AVFG to work to share resources, and coordinate operations. The group is functioning to this day.

In the beginning, the AVFG was composed of 10 farms: Anusuya, Annapurna, Aurogreen, AuroOrchard, Discipline, Djaima, Kottakarai, Nilatangam, Revelation and Service Farm.

Socio-Economics

Auroville started with a small population, of less than 70 people, and was far from self-supporting. The Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) was the main source of funds for the new experiment, providing money to meet the basic needs of the fore-comers. In the context of food production, the ashram had already been running farms of its own. As such, Annapurna and AuroOrchard were obtained from the ashram after the inauguration of AV and received support from the ashram of about 500 Rupees per month. Early on AuroOrchard was asked by the Mother to try being self-supporting and since this time self-supporting farms have been the norm in AV with occasional support from outside for set-up or infrastructure costs or maintenance assistance from the Central

Fund. This was the case for Aurogreen which received 6.5 lakhs from AV in order to start up, but which has been self-supporting and has not looked for outside money for the last 20 years.

With the small number of people in the beginning, there was a definite sense of collective endeavour and in this spirit, a food and dry goods depot was developed in 1970, later to become the Central Food Distributor. In 1970/71 Pour Tous began functioning and some farms had their own stalls from which they sold their produce. In 1973, however, the SAS and Auroville experienced major clashes over the functioning of the new community and that year the SAS withdrew its financial support presenting AV with its first financial crisis.

AV was able to meet this challenge through organization and initiative. In September 1973, the Central Food Distribution began full operation out of the amphitheatre and employed a bullock cart for goods delivery to the various settlements. Then in February 1974 Pour Tous, as an attempt to eliminate the exchange of money in AV, fully materialized after years of planning. A certain amount of assistance was opened up when the German FAO offered Auroville a grant in 1974 for the development of 17 acres of fodder crops with required equipment such as a bore well, sprinkler irrigation, shredder and a bullock cart. The financial crunch was being tackled, but AV was still feeling the pressure of the constraints posed them by the lack of money.

Auroville's commitment to support the food growing effort began in earnest in 1976. Faced with another critical financial situation that allowed fewer funds to be spent on produce from the Pondicherry market, several individuals in addition to those already committed to food production began to grow food, and the community as a whole became more aware of the need to become increasingly self-sufficient in its food requirements” (AVR #5 Fall 1981).

This financial crisis made Auroville very conscious of food growing within the community, as self-sufficiency in food became the best way to cut costs. Consequentially farming became more widely discussed.

“While money’s so short, what we get in our food baskets cannot be always what we “want”, but what’s cheapest on the market. During the wet season, vegetable prices in general go up. Even good old brinjal, which usually never exceed 50 HP/kg, are up to 80. In the last week floods in Trichy have made vegetables not only incredibly expensive but also hard to find. Potatoes and carrots are out of reach at 1.80 and 2.20 respectively (AV Notes #76 Nov. ’77).”

The produce available from Auroville at this time was snake gourd, green papaya, tapioca, pumpkin, and beans. A real push was being made for Aurovillians to adapt to locally produced and inexpensive types of vegetables and grains. This was seen as an absolute necessity in order that AV farms could provide for the community’s self-sufficiency. Though the original farms of Auroville were functioning at this time, the only new one started was Djaima in April 1978. Djaima was started as a holistic community that also dealt in vegetables, fruit, poultry, and fish production. The biggest response to the financial crisis came from the establishment of several kitchen gardens in the residential section of the community (32 Auroville: The First Six Years).

Awareness about food production in the community was being raised in an earnest effort to try and preserve what little money was available by producing and sourcing the population’s basic needs internally. Publications like the above quote were disseminated amongst the community in a community-wide food production initiative. These efforts were necessary because AV was not self-sufficient in food, and as such, the Pondicherry market became the boon for food in AV. This trend of sourcing food in Pondy as opposed to growing more in AV has remained in AV through the years, but for different reasons. At first, it was out of necessity, but slowly a consumer preference has arisen for Pondy produce based on price competition and also a desire to eat more

‘western’ foodstuff that we cannot grow here. For this period, however, the Pandy market was only used when absolutely necessary to meet the basic dietary needs of Aurovillians.

In 1979, the introduction at Pour Tous of the “Envelope” system had a large impact on food production. This system was a method of budgeting modelled after the Mother’s management of ashram finances. Under the Envelope system, areas of spending that were deemed essential to the continued harmonious functioning of Auroville were funded through an envelope that contained money. The money contained in any single envelope could only be spent on that envelope’s designated purpose, with an “Unspecified” envelope acting as a buffer. Donations could be made to specific envelopes. There was an envelope dedicated solely to food growing in Auroville and it is from this envelope that the Food Growing Cooperative received and returned its funds. Each food-growing unit was assigned a minimum budget, the combined budget of which comprised the total minimum requirement for the “Food Growing” envelope. Funds for this envelope were coming from outside grants, donations, and funds generated within AV. Most of the produce grown in Auroville was distributed by Pour Tous, but some crops like tapioca and cashew were sold outside for cash. (AVR #5 Fall 1981). The costs covered by this envelope were more than just seeds and compost: this category also included wages for agricultural workers hired by Auroville, diesel for irrigation pumps, and money to purchase supplementary chicken food.

During the Envelope/Food Growing Cooperative era, an ideal aim was set for Auroville farms to return in equivalent produce, at least 50% of the money allocated to them from the “Food Growing” envelope. In 1980 Rs.70,800 was distributed to the Food Coop with the Coop returning approximately Rs.49,000 (69%) in produce. By Jan. 1980, the Food Coop was set at a weekly minimum allotment of Rs.1318, though this was sometimes not received in full. By 1981, the Food Coop was only receiving half of its minimum weekly budget, due to a general lack of funding for Auroville. At this same time, there were occasions when the amount of money spent in Pandy on market produce was close to double what was invested in AV farms (AVN #134, Jan 1980) (AVR #5, Fall 1981).

However, there were some farms, such as Aurogreen, Revelation, and Kottakarai returning in kind more than 100% of the investments put into the farms. There were indeed times when the farms taken as a whole were able to return more than 100%. As the minimum budget continued to not be met, the returns from farms could not be maintained. Overall, the Envelope system had been in the process of decline when finally in 1984 it could no longer be maintained. In its place, individual accounts were created and the Food Growing Cooperative disintegrated.

Operations at Pour Tous continued to expand during and after this period. It is at this time that most of the produce from AV farms was going directly to Pour Tous for distribution to the community. The decade following the demise of the Food Growing Cooperative is, a relatively quiet period as financial crisis was averted and the community began to expand. Pour Tous began to supplement the regular basket deliveries with the creation of the stall where people could come and purchase extra food and sundry items produced in Auroville or brought in from Pondicherry.

The Farms and Dairy Service

Around 1984, the Farms and Dairies group started an initial move away from collective food distribution to the shopping era. A stall was started in Revelation where only Auroville grown food was being sold. Since this was not a very central place not many people would come for their purchases. The stall got moved to Bharat Nivas where now is Auroville food processing is now functioning. Since Auroville farms could not keep the shelves

filled, over time outside products were also sold to satisfy the customers. Eventually a stall was started in Pour Tous.

For the past seven years the Farms and Dairies Service has operated a revolving loan fund, which presently consists of Rs.50,000/-. This fund was started with several thousand rupees that were collected by setting aside one per cent of the turnover of each farm in a common fund. Further funds have been raised by assisting various training programs for agricultural groups such as Agriculture Man and the Environment (AME). The farms agreed to donate the monies thus earned to the revolving loan fund. Some donations have supplemented the fund and brought it to its present level of Rs.50,000/-. In brief, the farmers collected about forty percent of the fund and Aurovillians and friends (# 303 – Sept 89 – pp.6-7) have donated sixty percent.

This fund is used primarily in three ways:

- First, it sponsors small projects that are of general benefit to all the farms. Examples of such projects have been the cheese and butter units at Aurogreen and Nilatangam, which, besides offering nutritious products to the community, help the farms to handle the fluctuating demand for milk; this is especially true during the summer months. Another type of small project has been the construction of grain storage and drying facilities to handle the forty odd tons of cattle and poultry feed which farmers here purchase in bulk during the season. It should be mentioned that the storage and drying facilities, as well as those for milk processing, are made available to many Auroville communities that are not members of AV Farms and Dairies.
- The second use of the fund is as an ‘advance loan account’ to the individual farms could borrow against payments for food produce supplied to Auroville, in advance of payment. For example, when Pour Tous was in financial difficulties and has too much of a debt, as happens nearly every summer, the Farms and Dairies Service regularly advances payments of around Rs.20,000 to its farms and in effect covers the Pour Tous deficit, which is to some extent due to deficits of Aurovillians in Pour Tous.
- The third and main use of the revolving loan fund however, is to make bulk purchases of cattle and poultry feed each year. For several reasons it is advisable to purchase grains in bulk at harvest time. The price then is generally cheaper, but more importantly, at harvest time it can be checked to be sure that Auroville purchases grains grown locally and without pesticides. The chemical-free grains, if not purchased immediately, are sent to the general market where there is no way to reliably ascertain that chemical-free nature.

The Farms and Dairies members feel a sense of accomplishment at having successfully managed this fund for the past seven years. Through careful management practices the fund has the demands on it have also increased, especially as the group makes more of an effort to secure chemical-free grains for cattle feed. It has become clear that to function at an optimal level, the fund needs to be increased to Rs.100,000/-. The farmers are not in a position to raise such a large amount of capital solely by their own efforts and for this reason, they turn to the units who consider this revolving fund to be a useful tool for the community to make contributions to the fund. This fund is a practical way for Auroville to move towards its ideals of chemical-free agriculture and use of organically grown grains for animals. As pointed out, the fund is mainly used during specific harvest periods, particularly in 2003 to 2004 when the fund’s capital is kept with Auroville Trust where it can be used to improve the general cash flow situation in Auroville. Interested people can contact Herve at Revelation, or can make deposits directly to Auroville Trust, Farms and Dairies Service account via Judith at the Secretariat.

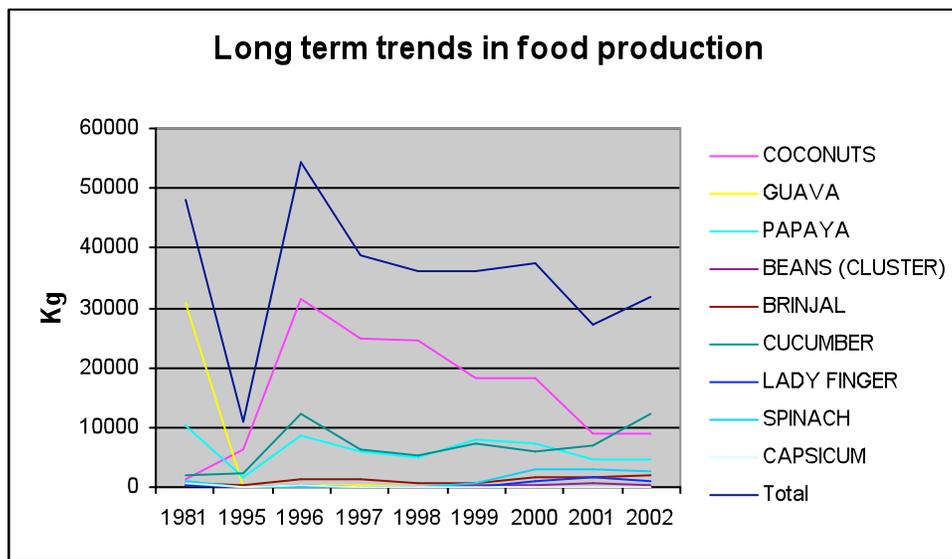
A major development during the mid-nineties, was the establishment of a maintenance from the Central Fund for farmers in Auroville which would guarantee that the farmers would have their own basic needs looked after as

they tried to produce for the community. It created also the feeling of belonging to Auroville, which was often pretty far away when you had to farm for your own existence. The AVFG also organized a floating loan of RS.50,000 that the group could loan out to individual farms for security or capital investment. The major crisis during this time was the decision by the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board to discontinue their inclusion of AV in their policy of providing free electricity to farmers for pumping. This had a major effect on the costs operation for farms such as AuroOrchard, Aurogreen and the necessary response was to downsize operations until alternatives could be found to combat the shift in expenses.

The positive side of all this was that Auroville farmers were forced to start to conserve water and energy that most farms up to that point hardly practiced.

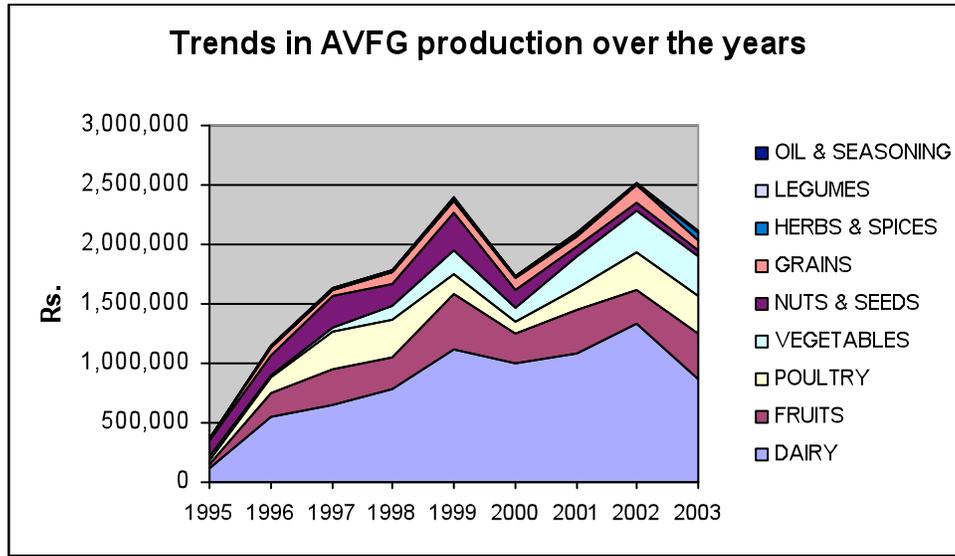
Production over the years

The following graph summarises data available for key crops from before the AVFG.

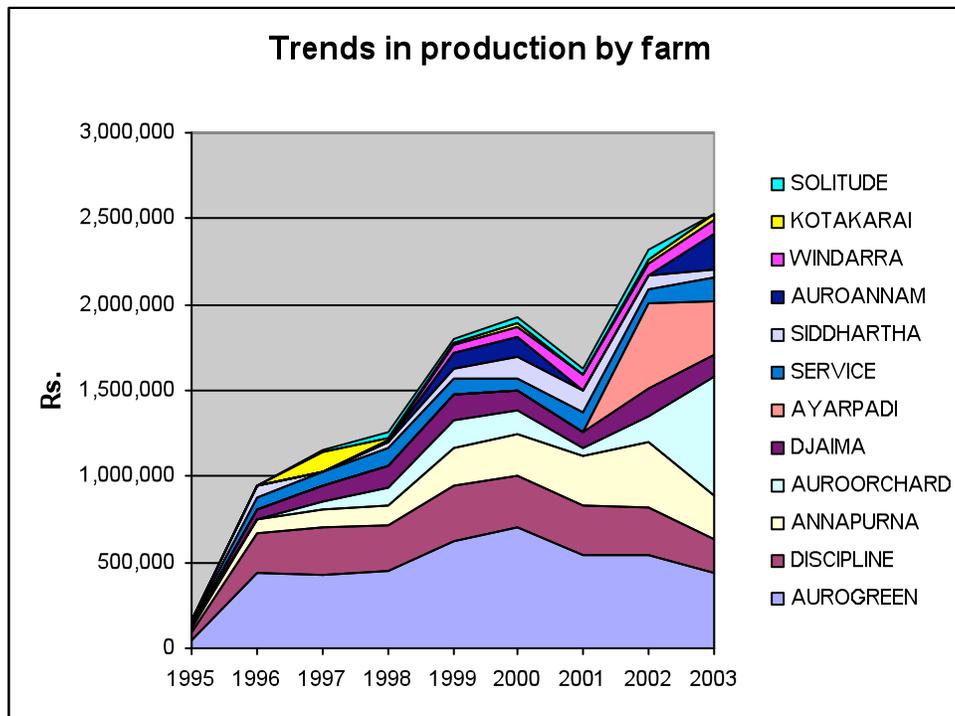


Realizing that the Auroville population was around 400 people in 1980/81 the amount produced per capita was far higher than it is now. At this stage, farmers were still pushing production in whatever could be grown, irrespective of the community needs.

Based on the records available through the AVFG office, the following trends in production for the AVFG as a whole can be examined. It should be borne in mind that the AVFG records are by no means consistent over the years. In addition, for consistencies sake, production is given in rupees and not in kilograms. In fact, it can be seen that the trends in the first graph do not correlate to the second graph.



Overall, in terms of cash turnover, the graph shows that the dairy sector is by far the biggest in Auroville. This has been the case since records began. Fruits, poultry, and vegetables, in that order, follow the dairy sector. Despite efforts towards developing the grain sector, in monetary terms this is still relatively small. Worryingly, in terms of the health of the soil at least, legumes continue to occupy an insignificant part of the current AVFG production.



According to this graph, Aurogreen has overall been the biggest provider for Auroville in terms of food production. Aurogreen is followed by Discipline, Annapurna, and AuroOrchard. In recent years the major farms have been joined by Ayarpadi, shown on the graph, and Brihaspati, not yet included in the graph. In real terms, AuroOrchard has over the years been the largest farm in Auroville. However during certain periods, a proportion of its production has not been included in the AVFG accounts.

As mentioned above, the overall trends between the graphs do not correspond. In the first graph, production has been somewhat erratic over the last few years, while in the graph immediately above, production has increased consistently year on year, except for 2001. One explanation is that the total production of some farms, such as AuroOrchard mentioned above, have not been included every year in the farm group records.

Conclusion – the Past and the Future

Based on anecdotal evidence the early Auroville farming period, ending in the first half of the eighties was the pioneering era, with the exception of Charlie and Gerard. All of the old “farmers” evaporated during the eighties, to take up other roles. The budget system could only work, as long it was small, personal, and full of idealism. As time went on more individuality crept in.

During the late eighties, an effort was made to “professionalize” the farming system, both in terms of production as well as finances. Formal structures were set up and monitoring was carried out to some limited extent. The nineties saw the advent of the AVFG and yet more attempts to improve the lot of the farmers and increase production. However, up until the present day, substantial increases in production are yet to be seen.

It remains to be seen if the findings and recommendations of the AVFG assessment will make a substantial impact on the status of farming in Auroville. The assessment is perhaps the first time that the farms in Auroville have had the opportunity to stand back and closely analyse what has been happening in the farming sector, as well as put together a plan to address the key issues. This leaves the AVFG in a position to be proactive in determining their future. It is up to the farmers and their partners to seize the opportunity which has presented itself.

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