

On the Subject of Work in Auroville

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Introduction

Auroville can be viewed from many different perspectives in relation to what it is aspiring to do – embodying human unity in diversity, creating an alternative way of life, building a city for an ideal society, living in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds/politics/nationalities, and so on. But all these perspectives manifest in the life of a group of people who have consciously chosen to live in this physical, geographical place called Auroville, in rural Tamil Nadu, India, by doing some work. The residents of Auroville today are fewer than 2000. But Auroville, a city in the making for an intended 50,000 residents, employs people everyday from the surrounding villages. These workers numbered 3709 in March 2000, and today may be as many as 5000. The work of 2000 people inside Auroville catering to the numerous perspectives of Auroville's aspirations sustains not only their own lives, but those of an additional 5000 families and their villages – this model by itself is not unique as can be seen in most industrial townships. But there are other differences, some of which are highlighted below.

While the subject of work is one of the most central issues to life in Auroville, as described by the Mother, it defines in great measure what it means to be a resident of Auroville. Work, in simple terms in any place, can be broadly termed as physical or mental effort or activity directed towards the production or accomplishment of something; a job, a trade, a profession, occupation or a means of livelihood. In Auroville this work is also (and primarily) seen as an offering or consecration of oneself to the Divine; but what does this mean at an everyday level that makes it different? Any work in the world can also be looked at as an offering to the Divine, without having to call it thus, but in Auroville when this takes the primary focus, and its interpretation is given by the Mother in *The Dream*, “*Work would not be there as the means of gaining one's livelihood, it would be the means whereby to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service to the whole group, which on its side would provide for each one's subsistence and for the field of his work,*” there is a shift in focus from livelihood to capabilities and aspirations. It then becomes an area of expression of one's own potential that allows the individual to grow and is a progressive movement. It is this definition of work that attracts many people to Auroville; for work here breaks the confining and limiting barriers of formal contractual, routine and choice-less tasks in market situations and social institutions. Yet this very freedom offered by this new definition of work in Auroville has its own challenges because it assumes that it is accompanied by its complementing counterpart – responsibility. If changes in personal lives are deemed necessary for growth, then how would this translate when we experiment with frequent changes in vocations and types of work as part of such personal changes? How can we create a dependable work force within the community that can be relied upon to run our essential services, from education, infrastructure, economy, etc? Is there a lack of responsibility (or self-discipline) or dislike of routine/repetitive tasks or need to provide livelihoods for the villages, that makes us dependent on an external

workforce for building up the economy of Auroville through commercial or non-commercial activities? For this reason of dependability, there is obviously a preference, particularly in the commercial sector for employees as opposed to voluntary and selective inputs based on personal choice and ability. How then do we plan future developmental needs with people whose personal objectives and needs may not match with that of a larger collective vision of Auroville? This is one of our present dilemmas.

Working for the collective welfare while sustaining themselves with difficulty

When work is not connected to gaining livelihood, and should be the case of at least all those Aurovilians who are on a centrally funded maintenance doing work for the collective economy through production and services of essentials (as contrasted to those producing non-essentials that once again go to subsidize the life of people producing essentials), and when these sustenance levels provided are below the needs because of rising market prices and expansion of the minimum needs basket itself that is accompanied by the development of any society, some of these people are forced into taking up economic activities and responsibilities outside the community (if not possible within the community) only in order to sustain themselves. The problem here is not so much taking up the economic activity as much as it is pursuing an interest dictated by money that was precisely what the role of work was not meant to be in Auroville.

Sustenance covered from elsewhere

On the other end of the spectrum we have people who prefer to be financially independent (through personal incomes) to be able to have the freedom to pursue any activity of their choice, whether it is directly for the welfare of the collective or preferring a life of discovery through arts, philosophy, etc. These people usually have to go out from time to time to Europe or to other developed economies to work for a while in a variety of occupations there. The money so earned helps to buy freedom from financial dependence on minimum levels of the central economy through tasks that may not be interesting. But this does not directly promote the growth of Auroville as an organism by itself, although it does economically, up to the point that it weans away a large number of people from the central economic responsibility of Auroville and also allows them the freedom to work in any place of their choice. But this going out of Auroville to earn and bring back money to live in Auroville, is not an easy process and has its own limitations, both at the individual and collective level.

Sustain themselves and the rest without adequate appreciation by the collective

The commercial sector is another small group of Aurovilians who produce goods that bring in money that feeds the economy. On this small group of people rests a big responsibility that involves generating money that will feed not only almost 50% of the village workforce (in the year 2000), and all the social implications of that, besides being responsible for more than 50% of the expenses of the community (livelihood of people, services, infrastructure) Central Fund Budget Report 2004-2005. Paradoxically, these people with high societal responsibility are not deemed the 'favoured' citizens of this

township, because although there is a joy in being able to direct/utilize/organise in such a way that there is a minimization of outlays and a maximization of results, it also could be seen as a power-dynamic.

Between the above-mentioned three large groups of people, are many others who are not in an either-or position of belonging entirely here or there, some doing more than one person's work at a time, some others falling under one group for a period of time and moving into another group later depending on personal circumstances, and so on.

All this speaks not only about the richness of the diversity, but also about the high level of intra-inequities as well as the difficulty in devising uniform rules or regulations that can be applicable to all.

- This schism between individual and collective needs is the start of many of our problems and difficulties, translating into work needs of the individual and collective. Our current definitions and approaches to the concept of work and the gap between individual and collective perceptions and requirements of 'work' varies widely.
- The carrying capacity of Auroville for providing support to the surrounding region directly through employment (and the rest) is another question for the sustainability of Auroville (not only economic, but at other levels). This can also be looked at from the point of how much wealth generation through work is fed back into Auroville and how much goes outside. What will be the trends in this area for the next years?
- Being a project in India and employing people from India, makes it accountable to the labour laws and rules of the country: how much freedom does this allow for doing work that enhances the potential of the individual and the collective?
- An Aurovilian's work commitment, based on a collective understanding of Mother's guidelines or individual interpretations of it or both in relation to work as a "*means to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, doing at the same time service to the whole group,*" is sufficient to override the commonly understood predefined norms and guidelines that are bound by laws or rules. But on a day-to-day level, who decides whether there is any breach of responsibility and what are the penalties thereof? And simultaneously, the work of most employees of Auroville is based on formal contractual agreements of labour, legalized through wages, salaries, and benefits from an employer towards an employee. These parallel realities that exist –, do they create a

conflict of interests for both the resident Aurovilian and the non-resident worker?

- And if in Auroville a new way of work is being attempted so that eventually it becomes a model for other places, then should these new ways of work also be tried when we work with workers from the villages?

A survey can be done on the work of every Aurovilian to create a database of human resources of Auroville, which is of a demographic nature: person, nationality, age, sex, educational and occupational background, current nature of work, early history of work before and after coming to Auroville, and job mobility. Such a human resource database can serve as a resource pool providing us with profiles of a potential work force, and also try to see how much work is actually based on individual or collective work need, as well as how much work is based on non-gaining of livelihoods. We can use it to match skill sets with job requirements for future recruitment needs.

Such a survey done on 'work' ought to bring out the various gaps of needs and wants related to work as it exists today in Auroville, and we could attempt to find out from people their own personal definitions and perceptions of work and try to match this and observe why it is at variance with the larger definition of work in Auroville as given by the Mother. This would be more sociological in nature with personal interviews covering a stratified sample of the residents in order to address the five areas listed above to probe deeper and try to take stock of individual perceptions and interpretations of what work means – whether it is seen as collective action, integral yoga, inner quests, creative self expression, personal growth, escape from inner conflicts, pursuit of livelihood or in other ways.

Such knowledge can assist us in framing more open-ended and innovative definitions and guidelines for work, which could also help in considering how future work forms and ethics are very likely to be influenced by improved technology and other global trends that will affect the economy of Auroville and its carrying capacity. Auroville could use this opportunity to move from its made-to-order economy into other areas that are more knowledge-based, in which it is equipped to be part of these emerging trends. This not only means up-gradation of the educational/skills training of its young residents, but also that of the surrounding village youth. This is likely to be Auroville's challenge for the future – having the insights to identify our core values and the creativity to redesign them in new ways that matter.