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Auroville, City of Dawn

“...a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities”

An overview of CHEC’s work with the experimental township of Auroville, including an update on the recently opened Nadukuppam Community Training Centre

What is Auroville?

Auroville can be understood in many ways: a ‘living laboratory’, a ‘research station’ and an ‘international experiment’ are just some of the terms in which it describes itself. Perhaps most importantly, though, it is a home to its 2, 500 inhabitants - a community who have come together with the shared goal of building a place to live based on the ideals of harmony and unity put forward by spiritual leader Mirra Alfassa almost a century ago. Located in the Tamil Nadu district of India and established in 1968, Auroville has become well known for its environmental regeneration work, rural development, innovative technologies and high quality handicrafts. It has received numerous national and international awards in recognition of its pioneering work, including endorsements from UNESCO: at the town’s 40th anniversary celebrations in 2008, UNESCO issued a statement praising Auroville as



Location of Auroville Township
Image taken from www.auroville.org

‘a successful and unique model project, proving the capacity of an international community, after 40 years of existence, to continue to live up to its initial founding ideals of peace and international harmony and within the spirit of mutual respect and sustainable development which are also UNESCO’s own values and principles’.

Auroville past and present

The inspiration for an ideal township built around the concept of human unity came to Mirra Alfassa – known as the Mother - in the 1930s, but it was not until the mid-1960s that the Sri Aurobindo Society in Pondicherry began to make plans to see her vision realised.

With the blessing of the Mother, the backing of the Indian Government and the unanimous support of UNESCO, 5000 people gathered on 28th February 1968 to witness the inauguration of the township that would become Auroville.

Today, the 2,500 inhabitants of Auroville come from some 49 nations and represent a diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds. Auroville is comprised of a Peace Area, an Industrial Zone, a Residential Zone, an International Zone, a Cultural Zone and a Green Belt: it aims to be sustainable and self-supporting, with small and medium industries, cultural and educational facilities and large spaces designated for wildlife and conservation.



Auroville, City of Dawn
Image taken from www.auroville.org

The spirit of Auroville is perhaps best summarised in the four key ideas which underpin the town's charter:

1. *Auroville belongs to nobody in particular; Auroville belongs to humanity as whole. However, to live in Auroville one must be a willing servitor of the divine consciousness*
2. *Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and of a youth that never ages*
3. *Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and within, Auroville will boldly spring forward towards future realisations*
4. *Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual research for a living embodiment of an actual human unity*

Auroville and CHEC

CHEC has been involved with Auroville almost since the township's beginnings. When UNESCO commissioned a consultative review of the Auroville project in 1968, the task was carried out by long-term CHEC member Professor Vernon Newcombe: both Professor Newcombe and CHEC founder Zena Daysh subsequently became regular visitors to Auroville as it grew throughout the 1960s and 70s. These early visits were to prove the foundation for a long-lasting partnership, as CHEC went on to support multiple development projects in Auroville and the surrounding area over the next 4 decades. The link between Auroville and CHEC is still strong today, with CHEC most recently supporting the construction of the Nadukuppam Community Training Centre in association with Auroville in 2016.

CHEC projects in Auroville

Kottakarai Demonstration Village

In 1987, inspired by Auroville's work in the fields of solar energy, organic agriculture and engineering, CHEC made the decision to assist Auroville in raising money to facilitate further such projects. After submitting applications to the UK Department for International

Development (DIFD) NGO Joint Funding Scheme (JFS), CHEC secured a grant of £70,000 over three years for projects in Auroville. This money funded the Kottakaria Demonstration Village and Scientific Research Centre. Today, Kottakarai is home to some 1,500 people and acts as a centre for alternative technologies: solar cooking, biogas plants and ferro-cement construction are just some of the innovations embraced at Kottakarai.

Palmyra Afforestation Unit

In 1991, CHEC secured further JFS funding for a watershed management and afforestation project around Auroville. The project, drafted by CHEC's Professor Vernon Newcombe in collaboration with colleagues at Auroville, covered over 2,500 acres of wasteland belonging to 250 villages and aimed to facilitate the planting of over half a million trees for fruit, fodder and hardwood. Through JFS, CHEC was able to provide £44,000 to the project over the course of four years.



Palmyra
Image taken from www.auroville.org

Today, the Palmyra Centre for Ecological Land Use and Rural Development continues to oversee sustainable development projects and runs regular training programmes for farmers, forestry officials, government officers and NGOs. The Centre aims to promote sustainable and ecologically sound land use practices and draws from both traditional knowledge and new technologies to do so.

Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG)



AVAG was founded in 1983 to act as a bridge between Auroville and its surrounding villages. CHEC first became involved with the group in 1993, when it obtained JFS funding to support an AVAG project focussing on working women, children and unemployed youth. With this funding, AVAG was able to introduce a programme of intensive skills training in night schools and working women's clubs: as well as encouraging women to become involved in income-generating activities, these training sessions aimed to provide forums for women to address issues such as dowry practices, caste, gender and local politics. In 1995, CHEC successfully applied for additional JFS funding to allow AVAG to extend their work to an even greater number of villages around Auroville.

In May 1999, JFS approved a further 5 years' funding for CHEC to continue working with AVAG. With CHEC's support, AVAG has been able to reach over 35 villages around Auroville: the group currently works with approximately 3,500 women and 1,000 men through training programmes and self-help groups, as well as organising night schools in 10 villages for some 250 children. AVAG emphasises the importance of allowing individuals to define and manage their own development priorities, and has facilitated the growth of a network of youth and women's groups providing childcare, leadership training, skills training and forums for political, social and cultural discussion. Through these activities, AVAG has become a highly respected NGO in South India, with good links to local government and

many requests from other NGOs for training: CHEC is proud to have played a role in the group's development.

Centre for Development Alternatives (CFDA)

In 1995, CHEC used JFS funding to launch a project in Southern India in partnership with the Centre for Development Alternatives. CHEC's funding was used to assist rural women in forming savings and credit groups, with the aim of ending reliance on informal sources of credit and exploitative money-lenders. By 1999, the project had introduced women's credit groups and a highly effective revolving credit scheme to over 30 villages. All members contribute small amounts of money to the credit scheme, and in turn are allowed to borrow larger sums of money when needed. Training for income generation and assistance in establishing small and medium businesses were crucial elements of the project and were introduced alongside the credit scheme.

Applied Research Projects

In 1998, the British Government's Bilateral Aid Programme contracted CHEC, alongside British and Indian consultants, to launch two applied research projects in India. The projects – *Community Learning and Information Communication Centres Projects (CLIC)* and *Community Sustainable Development Indicators (CSDI)* – were supported by CHEC India and the Indian Government-owned Housing and Urban Development Corporation.

CHEC and Auroville today: Pitchandikulam Forest and Nadukuppam Community Training Centre

In 2016, CHEC announced that it would be using a grant from The Heath Trust to fund the construction of a community training centre at Pitchandikulam Forest, a unit under the Auroville Foundation. The Centre is part of the newly inaugurated Sustainable Livelihoods Institute (SLI) at Auroville, with the SLI itself being a joint project of the Tamil Nadu State Rural Livelihood Mission and the Auroville Foundation.

The Pitchandikulam Forest was established in 1973 as part of a drive by the Auroville International Community to reforest parts of the bare and eroded township site. Four decades later, the 70 acre site has been transformed into a thriving ecosystem and vibrant enclave of Tamil Nadu's indigenous tropical dry evergreen forest. The site now supports more than 800 plant species, and the Pitchandikulam Bioresource Centre contains a library and information hub for the education of visitors in restoration ecology, environmental science, and the identification and use of indigenous medicinal plants.



The Nadukuppam Centre, Pitchandikulam Forest

The Nadukuppan Community Training Centre is located in Nadukuppam Village, one of Pitchandikulam's key outreach centres. The Centre was first conceived in 2005, when ongoing work with village communities identified a need for a place where students, women's groups and farmers could meet, take part in workshops and learn from one another. After a lengthy building process beset by delays due to drought, flooding and extreme weather events, the Centre was officially opened in March 2016, with CHEC member Sonia Dyne attending the opening ceremony. The 25 acres of wasteland originally allocated to the project have now been transformed, with nine reservoirs supplying water to villagers and windmills providing electricity to the centre.

The Centre's activities will include indigenous forest planting and restoration programmes, training in organic farming and gardening, programmes focussing on women's income generation and schemes promoting and facilitating environmental education. It is hoped that the Centre will become a base for sustainable rural planning and an engine for local sustainable development. Current and planned activities at the centre include:

- A **women's centre** for women to participate in training and workshops, get involved in village development projects and coordinate their income generation programmes
- A **health drink preparation area** where malnourished students can receive a nutritionally balanced health drink supplement
- **Spirulina tanks** producing spirulina for use in the health drinks programme: the spirulina – a blue-green algae eaten in many parts of the world and important as a source of protein and omega 3 – is monitored and prepared by women's self-help groups and is a key source of income generation for these groups
- A **demonstration vegetable garden** for the demonstration of organic farming principles such as vermi-compost, use of effective micro-organisms and integrated pest management. Produce from the demonstration garden is used in the health drink programme and sold at the local market by self-help groups
- A **medicinal plant garden** with educational information about medicinal uses for different plants: there are also plans for the produce from the garden to be used in setting up a herbal medicine dispensary at the women's centre
- An **indigenous plant nursery** containing 30 000 seedlings of various tropical dry evergreen forest species for use in plantation programmes and nursery development. Training for women's self-help groups also takes place at the indigenous plant nursery.



CHEC member Sonia Dyne and project leader Joss Brookes at the Nadukuppan Centre's official opening



Project leader Joss Brooks with CHEC board member Kabir Shaik



Women take part in training, workshops and income generation programmes at the Nadukuppan Community Training Centre

“The Training Centre is a really beautiful asset to have at Nadukuppan [as well as] holding regular training sessions and meetings organised around women’s empowerment, its position right next to one of our created water bodies teaches the importance of holding rain water up high to replenish the groundwater. Our series of ponds interspersed among gardens, fields and forest patches make a beautiful, productive water retention landscape. I wish you could see it”

- Project leader Joss Brookes

More information about the Nadukuppan Training Centre can be found on CHEC’s [projects](#) page and through the [Pitchandikulam Forest](#) website, while information about other ongoing projects at Auroville can be found at www.auroville.org.

For more information about CHEC, please visit www.checinternational.org or contact contact@checinternational.org / tel:+44 (0) 20 3689 0979