As I walk along the red soiled kaccha road scattered with dry leaves which produce a crushing sound under my feet, I am able to hear bird songs which enthrall my senses. Huge tree canopies protect me from the harsh sun and I find myself in the lap of nature. Intermittently I find isolated clay buildings in distance which remind me of human existence. Once in a while a person in T-shirt and shorts passes me on a bicycle symbolizing a simple way of living. Life moves on very slowly around me. That’s Auroville!

Auroville is situated near Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast on the Chennai-Pondicherry Highway. Till the year 1968, it was a barren land with no productivity whatsoever. It was the vision of the spiritual master Sri Aurobindo and a French lady Mirra Alfassa whom the followers call ‘The Mother’ to build a community named Auroville which would be a place of spiritual living. It was envisioned to be a place of human unity, with no inhibitions whatsoever; a place where there is simple yet meaningful life. They chose the place and their followers, most of whom were foreigners of Dutch and French origins, took to the task of regenerating life on the barren landscape. In February 1968, the community came into being with 124 countries participating in the process.

The plan of the place was designed in a spiral manner, centred on an existing Banyan tree and the Matrimandir – literally ‘abode of the Mother’. Within 20 years, the entire landscape regenerated with their efforts into a lush green biodiverse forest. The community was planned to sustain a population of 50,000 people. Currently there are 4000 inhabitants with a variety of ethnicities dominated by Indians, French and Dutch. Various communities were set up early on to handle different aspects of developing the town. The spiral plan has sectors devoted to different zones like residential, socio-cultural, institutional, international, and industrial (Auroshilpam). The entire area is further surrounded by the Green zone.
My seven-day tour to Auroville was essentially a workshop on ‘Sustainable Habitats’ along with my classmates organized by Rachana Sansad’s Institute of Environmental Architecture in collaboration with Center for Scientific Research, Auroville. It comprised of presentations and discussions with architects, social workers and other people working at Auroville in different fields ranging from design of buildings to wastewater management to soil conservation. Along with lectures, there were site visits to various places in Auroville where experiments relating to environment in the form of buildings, landscapes, materials had been undertaken by Aurovilleans.

Having learnt about Auroville during my graduation days, I already had an idea about how it might be. But the actual experience was exhilarating. It was a different world in itself. It was as though we were cut-off from the rest of the world for those 7 days. To create such an extensive amount of bio-diversity out of a desert is truly commendable and it reflects upon the efforts of the early Aurovilleans.

At the workshop some of the interesting things I became acquainted with was GIS (Geographical Information Systems) used for analyzing the geographical conditions of the region; a new type of wastewater treatment system called as Vortex; use of Ferrocement as a lightweight plastic material for building; and use of Compressed Stabilized Earth Blocks (CSEBs) for building, which have extensively been used in Auroville.

In the evenings we were by ourselves free to explore the place. Since there is no public transport in Auroville we had to hire bikes for moving around. These evenings were fun-filled with a lot of amusement happening between us friends. We also visited Pondicherry a couple of times which is about half an hour from Auroville.

At Auroville, the built environment was innovation at its best. Every building was thoughtfully designed with all the aspects like materials, spatial quality, environmental aspects, landscape, and context given equal importance. The Matrimandir is the pinnacle of innovation. It literally means ‘Abode of the Mother’. Built over the past 30-35 years, it’s a meditation hall which is in the form of a huge dome covered with golden discs from outside which shimmer in the sunlight. The Matrimandir is conceptualized as a ball which emerged from the earth and due to this the landform around it has formed into ripples moving away from it.

The dome is lifted from the ground and supported by huge slanting walls. The golden discs are a metre in diameter, convex in shape and held in place over the concrete...
framework of the dome by suspension framework. The discs themselves are made up of small square mosaic tiles of golden colour. The structure is absolutely air and light tight from inside with only one ray of light allowed to enter upon which meditation is done. The meditation happens for 15 minutes. One is asked to meditate upon his/her negative aspects which one wishes to get rid of. The silence is killing. Even a deep breath can be heard because of the acoustical properties of the structure.

After the meditation we descended to the lowermost level below the dome. There was a circular white marble surface in a disc form sloping towards the centre. At the centre again there was a crystal ball right below the one above in the hall. So the light ray after having passed through the crystal in the dome above aligned itself again on the centre of this crystal. Water flowed over the sloping surface on the crystal and the sight and the sound here soothed my senses. This was arguably my best experience of the Matrimandir.

Around the Matrimandir were 12 landscaped gardens each being a sector of the circular space around. Nearby is an amphitheatre which has a conical structure at its centre inside which the soil from 124 countries was encased right at the inception of the community in 1968. Beside the Matrimandir stands the oldest living inhabitant of Auroville, the huge Banyan tree. Its aerial roots have taken root in the space around and it’s now difficult to find the real trunk.

Another innovative and environmentally sensitive building is Luminosity. It is a 3 storied apartment building built as an experiment to shift away from the bungalow or hostel typologies abundant otherwise. It has various concepts in environmental architecture put to use like solar power generation, waste water treatment, rainwater harvesting, green roofing and use of passive building techniques like natural ventilation, optimum and adjustable natural lighting. It also has a dehumidification system in place which is integrated with the entire structure. The building is quite simple in layout as an elongated block with 2 staircase blocks and 3 apartments on each floor between the staircase blocks. The orientation is optimised as the longer axis being at a slight tilt from east-west direction to derive maximum lighting and minimum heating. The apartments have openings on both longer facades and this makes ventilation easier.

The Gaia Garden and Newlands were two other houses which we visited. They too were environmentally sensitive and had individual specialities. While Gaia...
Newlands house concentrated on the use of environment friendly building materials. Its walls were made from coconut fibres and mud.

Along with the buildings being innovative and sustainable, the surrounding landscape too has been designed to be environment friendly. There are plans for rainwater harvesting pond which will serve the entire complex. Also there is waste water treatment going to happen. In order to increase the water table they plan to have 18 recharge wells spread all over the site.

Auroville symbolizes a way of living – a lifestyle. The basis of Auroville is spirituality which is reflected in the community way of living. This community life has given rise to a lot of socio-cultural activities. There are many cottage industries setup like bamboo handicrafts and furniture, cotton weaving, etc. These are to provide livelihood to the villagers. Aurovillean has also worked for Tamil Nadu tsunami relief, by organising activities like bag weaving for tsunami affected people. These bags are innovatively designed and sold under the name of ‘Small Steps’. They were given to us on the inception day as a memento. Thus a socially strong community reminds the visitor of his responsibilities towards society and the incompleteness of typical urban life.

The people of Auroville whom we met were very relaxed, calm and very patient in attending to us. The serenity of the atmosphere around had definitely affected them positively. The most remembered person on the tour was Tency. He was our workshop coordinator who managed the entire programme excellently. He was a jovial person to interact with, and because of his warm demeanour we established an excellent relationship with him. Another interesting Aurovillean was Kireet. He was a soil conservationist and he inexhaustibly explained us how watershed management has been done in Auroville. He showed us the ‘Grand Canyon’ of Auroville where bunds have been erected to preserve precious top soil from flowing away into the sea during monsoons which used to happen before. Hemant who has been an Aurovillean for the past 10 years explained us about the functioning of the place.
When a new comer arrives, he has to undergo a 2 year initiation programme wherein he is taught about the spiritual principles of Auroville. Once ready to accept the lifestyle, he is given a basic stay facility in a community hostel and a meagre pay within which he has to manage his life. Food is also free for him in the community kitchen. The person has to work for the community in any field say engineering, workshops, administration, social activities according to his interests. The principle of living there is not to own anything.

There is no extravagant living, no luxuries of the city life. Aurovilleans believe that everything is taken care of by the nurturing blessings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. According to Hemant, there have been no conflicts in the community till date. This lifestyle is difficult for an urban dweller to accept and I ponder whether this was the reason we used to visit Pondicherry in the evenings to get a glimpse of the hustle-bustle of the city life. Our psyche is attuned to the commercialised world which Auroville is not.

Overall the experience of Auroville has taught me many things. It showed the importance of simple living, caring for the society. It also brought about certain questions. Can we consider it as an ideal for sustainable society? Can it be replicated elsewhere and accepted by people? Or should its existence remain as something different from the mainstream society?