

Project Update: January 2010

Visit to Auroville ... 2nd Conservation Education meet ... December 2009 ...

A long journey from Saiha to Auroville came to an end when eyes saw soothing green all around. I guess no discussion over email could have prepared me for this wonderful feel! It was rain-time for the place as we discovered on our first day; making us reschedule our second conservation education meet and begin it with presentations on Auroville and Pitchandikulam.

Auroville, created by a special act of parliament, houses approximately 2,100 people from 50 odd nations. Watershed consciousness was the crux of the ecological restoration efforts at Auroville! While these efforts began during the late sixties serious botanical action took shape only during the nineties. About 150 sacred groves were surveyed with a view to comprehend and later conserve indigenous species, that formed an integral element of the local ecological landscape, and then existed only within their precincts. We saw how a landmass bereft of shade and water was transformed to the green jungle thriving with porcupines and civets besides the numerous birds who vocalized their presence throughout our meet. I found this very interesting and recalled Ransinhbaba temple with its small area of shade providing trees near Agraa. We discussed remnants of other civilizations discovered in the landscape; pointing towards prominence and development of the coast and reminded me how much I revelled in history. Even Romans' presence has been discovered around Auroville; Tamil kings were special invitees at coronations of Roman emperors!

Pitchandikulam, the group hosting us, was located within Auroville's green belt. Pitchandikulam, a bio-resource centre housing around 800 species, worked on environment education towards which it established centres and developed resource material besides the ongoing action with schools and much more. The team was involved with restoration of Adyar Ponga with the Tamil Nadu government. Adyar Ponga, home to one of the first fish breeding plants of India, is located on about 60 acres of prime land in Madras. I found the process very interesting, how the efforts began, their being "government contractors" from a perspective, political flavour of the action including fortnightly - monthly reporting by way of video-clips to the chief minister and Joss' view that restoration ecology by its very definition has to involve people! All this was besides the manner in which environment education had been ingrained in the entire process and was marching on.

We then went for a walk in the campus. While I do not get much excited in identifying trees and my awareness regarding them too is pathetic; I loved the ambience. As we walked, I immersed myself in it. Wood from one of trees, as was pointed out, was applied to make vessels and oil for use in temples! A wooden equipment that was lying was once used to crush groundnuts to oil with help of bulls! We saw different snails, butterflies, birds and while I could confidently identify more than a few I loved exploring my limited abilities with camera. Lots of ants too and what was great was that we were careful not to step over them. We then walked over to where the signages were being developed and found them to be stunning! Eric mentioned that one of them had to be present while the artists were at work and that while they were currently busy with the Adyar Ponga project they also took up projects for other organizations like the Cycus signage for Keystone Foundation. Paintings and carvings on rocks left us gaping; especially a civet! With due respect to tigers, elephants and rhinos, I liked seeing the smaller and lesser glamorous species represented in these efforts. Drizzling made the experience more fun and Joss remarked that while eucalyptus was anyways great it was all the more beautiful then; when it drizzled.

Next day we went for a beautiful drive on the East Coast Road. We saw the estuary and had a boat ride till the coast! I was on a beach after ages and the responded with few minutes of absolute silence. We saw crabs on the beach, and I recalled the beach-crabs depicted in Shekar's film ~ Point Calimere – Little Kingdom by the Coast. Eric pointed out that they moved only till the waterline and that I should refrain from venturing ahead. A little while later as I walked some of them jumped and disappeared in the sand leaving holes, the circumference of a pencil, as reminders. As I munched on yummy chocolate cookies, I realized how much I loved being there with the waves, wind and of course the music both of them created! While some of us were discussing oysters and crabs' others collected shells or added pictures to their collection.

We then went to a home for children, where we also saw an environment education centre established by Pitchandikulam. Posters were put up at the centre that focussed on coastal issues. Questions on these centres that had been pestering for some time revisited me then! How can these interpretation centres be designed such that they are as lively and interesting during an individual's second visit as they were during the first visit! This reminded me that I was yet to read on these types of centres. An interesting breakfast consisting of idli, vada and pongal pushed my questions aside. A brief talk by the principal followed.

Another drive, shorter than the previous one and we reached a school in Nadukuppam where we saw a programme by children ~ songs, skit and puppetry focussing on environmental issues. The school, based in a village that lay between 2 reserve forests, has been adopted by Pitchandikulam. I recalled an earlier discussion on the extent to which the participants of such programmes (including teachers) grasped issues that the programme focussed on. We proceeded towards the first floor and had a long discussion. We were told that an intensive 6-month training was undertaken for the teachers before they started sharing with students. Design was to involve people from nearby areas. While the content was designed by Eric for teacher training, he was not directly involved with students. As we moved on to discuss solar energy, waste segregation and recycling at the school I recalled our school at Agraa wondering if these actions could be taken up, if there was a need and to what end! We then moved on to talk of the Buckingham Canal; a human made structure aging about 200. We touched one of its ends earlier during the day; the other lay in Andhra Pradesh. We discussed how about 30,000 labourers would have suddenly moved in the vicinity from regions around towards its construction and manner in which they would have impacted natural resources; fuel for cooking, wild meat for diet, timber for shelter and more! And collectively wondered if these impacts are considered while planning "development projects". I recalled my trip with Raju to Mani Kheda in Shivpuri near Madhav National Park; a dam construction site where wild meat was in great demand, more so on days of weekly payment to labourers.

Post lunch we had presentations. The first one talked of how varied target groups were sensitized, and efforts made to augment their knowledge levels, by undertaking actions that were suited to each of them. This with a view to address the different threats to wildlife that emanated from them. One of the actions talked of how macaques that are arboreal have been spotted coming on to the road, getting killed in the process, and how school going children were asked to put up posters, to make people aware of the issue, at crucial points. Actions like setting up of interpretation centre, involving children in monitoring birds and writing articles in local press were also discussed.

Another presentation talked of a yearly programme with 4-hour sessions held at quarterly intermissions. It shared of being initiated at the invitation of the forest department as also of working on addressing local issues like visits by large number of devotees to a temple, located within the boundaries of a

protected area, on select days. Synergies were also established with experts to enthuse school going children; like visits organized to forested areas with bird watchers.

One presentation depicted a project that involved setting up of an eco-park which featured walks within a grown forest on private land, non scheduled species for display as also place to indulge in sports besides other attractions.

As we woke up early to indulge in spotting our avian friends, on the final day, we were wished a “wet morning” by the weather gods! Post breakfast we moved in a vehicle to an auditorium to see a film on Auroville and after getting a succinct picture from the film we moved on to the Matri Mandir. Amidst this I was feeling uneasy with the thought that we possibly could be left with less than optimal time, post the exercise, for our deliberations on conservation education.

After visiting the Matri Mandir we all went to the Botanical Garden. It was managed by a Scot who was now enjoying his 18th year at Auroville. We walked and discussed how the garden was compartmentalized into that grown naturally and the compartment that was tempered and which of them received more avian visitors. Here once again I came face to face with my hopelessness in recalling tree names as others in the group mentioned English, Latin and vernacular identities of those standing tall! However, I love being amidst trees and guess that’s it. We saw how the garden nurtured saplings such that they could also share them with other places in Auroville and beyond. Also interesting was the maze; plants cultivated such that one could walk through and for a moment feel that could get lost! This was a part of the efforts towards making the garden a platform for environment education as was the cactus collection. Rushing back to Pitchandikulam for lunch we got on to our sessions.

One of us shared on efforts in Lakshadweep and Kerela portraying how an individual could work on conservation education issues, how partnerships can be brought about with non government organizations, as also the manner in which government bodies can be involved.

Another presentation that focussed on developments in conservation education programme since previous year’s meeting talked of fashion in which local knowledge was being documented and local practices encouraged as part of conservation education efforts. The highlight being short video clips depicting song and dance sequence, all bringing out the intensity of involvement with the programme.

On my part I went back to our discussion on skill sharing by screening Point Calimere – Little Kingdom by the Coast in the manner of our screening at Mizoram. Halting in between, using the white board, sharing field guides and sharing of how we prepared for interpretations and the reactions we received.

We then discussed the dilemmas we faced in course of our efforts, the proposed web book and future plans while our hosts shared their amazing posters.

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