

Pour Tous Distribution Center:  
*Auroville's Communal Cooperative as Participatory Platform of  
Conscious Citizenship*

by  
Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith

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## ***Abstract***

*The Auroville ‘basic needs’ cooperative, Pour Tous Distribution Center, “PTDC,” is modeled on provisioning rather than consumerism, and on a social rather than a capitalist economy, a reflection of the ideals on which the intentional township was founded. Supported by the collective fund of the community, none of the operational expenses of the outlet are included in the cost of items – all of which are provided at their cost of purchase and in the spirit of service to members. Knowing that no profit will be derived from the transfer of goods to members invites the participation of Auroville commercial units in contributing their products at cost to PTDC, and thereby directly to fellow Aurovilians. A contribution system by which each individual funds the communal account for the cooperative invites those with the inclination and financial means to do so to donate in excess of their personal expenditure, towards the collective. The absence of pricing on items available at PTDC is designed to encourage members to focus on their needs first, and emphasize that no items are sold at the cooperative, but purchased on behalf of members with their contributions. PTDC is an attempt to reverse the trend of individualization and marketization of the Auroville economy, and re-affirm the community’s foundational directive of collective provisioning to meet the basic needs of Aurovilians with no exchange of money. As such it exhibits a form of ‘conscious citizenship.’*

**Key words: community cooperative, communal economy, intentional community, conscious citizenship, basic needs.**

## ***Introduction***

Intentional community scholarship is a burgeoning field, as these societies are emerging worldwide as active laboratories for the experimentation and application of alternative socio-economic theories and practices. Auroville, an international township founded in India in 1968, is the largest and among the longest-standing intentional communities in the world,<sup>1</sup> with the most comprehensive scope of activity. As such it comes perhaps the closest to representing an autonomously functional socio-economic system, and offers significant insights into the practices and attitudes that foster and concretize alternative and aspirational community-driven blueprints for society. This paper will examine Auroville’s communal cooperative “PTDC” as a participatory

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporaries include Findhorn (UK) and Damnahur (Italy).

platform of conscious citizenship in light of the socio-economic ideals and present realities of the community.

### *Auroville's Communal Economy*

Auroville was founded with the utopian aspiration of realizing the ideal of human unity as a collective participating in the evolution of consciousness, as outlined by the revered Indian yogi and political revolutionary Sri Aurobindo.<sup>2</sup> His spiritual companion, Mirra Alfassa (known as “Mother”), Auroville’s founder, gave broad directives that form the basis of its socio-economic organization in line with this aspiration: a communal economy with no private property and no exchange of money between community members, each of whom would contribute to the collective in one of three ways (work, kind, or money),<sup>3</sup> and whose basic needs, would, in turn, be provided for by the community.

#### *1. No Private Property*

In the first clause of the Auroville Charter, Mira Alfassa writes: “*Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole.*”<sup>4</sup> This simple statement forms the core basis for Auroville’s participatory system of socio-economic organization. The centralized Auroville economy reflects many parallels with the communist system proposed by Karl Marx, who was concerned by the alienation that arises between individuals in the capitalist system, where competition “*conflicts with the*

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<sup>2</sup> Clarence-Smith, S., “Auroville: A Practical Experiment in Utopian Society,” BA Interdisciplinary Studies Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *The Mother on Auroville*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1977, 20.

<sup>4</sup> The Mother, *The Auroville Charter*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1968.

*ideal of solidarity with other human beings.*"<sup>5</sup> He saw that alienation between members of capitalist society resulted from the fact that individuals were not organized as a community, and, therefore, their work did not contribute to the community as a whole, nor benefit them as a member of the community, but favoured a 'bourgeois' class of individuals who privately owned 'capital': the means of production and the fruit of the labors of others.<sup>6</sup> In the *Communist Manifesto*, he called for the conversion of capital as private property into common property, "*the property of all members of society,*"<sup>7</sup> on the basis that "*Capital is a collective product... Capital is therefore not a personal, it is a social power.*"<sup>8</sup>

The basis of the Auroville economy is similar in theory, although it reaches beyond the Marxist provisos in several significant ways. According to Marx, "*the distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property.*"<sup>9</sup> Although the economic ideology of Auroville does not call for the complete abolition of private property, it does go beyond the abolition of ownership of exclusively 'the means of production' and the labour of others.

As follows from the afore-mentioned first clause of the Auroville Charter, the Auroville Foundation, which is the Government of India's appointed body for Auroville, is the holder of all Auroville land and assets: "*All is essentially collective property; there*

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<sup>5</sup> Haberman and Stevenson, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 473-500, New York, London: W.W. Norton Company, 1978, 485.

<sup>9</sup> Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," 484.

*is no private ownership of land or utilities within Auroville.*<sup>10</sup> No individual in Auroville privately owns the land or house they live in, or the commercial or service units they may have developed in Auroville; they are simply considered stewards or executives of the latter, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

In investing in these assets, Aurovilians “*are constantly investing in the collectively owned land, housing and business,*”<sup>12</sup> and because the Auroville economy is set up to provide for the collective, they derive “*nothing but advantage, since they have, so to speak, acquired all that they surrendered.*”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, including what in a Marxist framework would be considered ‘personal’ and not ‘private’ property into public property, such as an individual homes in Auroville, was part of what Mother envisaged as an experience of “*the joy and liberation of no longer having any personal possessions.*”<sup>14</sup>

## 2. No Exchange of Money

Auroville’s socio-economic imaginary goes a step further. Mother states that money does not constitute personal property either – “*Money does not belong to anybody. Money is a collective possession which should be used only by those who have an integral, comprehensive and universal vision*” – and that there would be no exchange of money between Aurovilians. To work towards a society in which money is channelled as a collective resource, and not exchanged between members of the community, a communal fund, the “Central Fund” pools together communal financial resources and is

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<sup>10</sup> “The Auroville Foundation,” Accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.auroville.org/contents/572>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rousseau, “The Origin of Civil Society,” 73.

<sup>14</sup> *The Mother on Auroville*, 2.

allocated by a representative group of community members, the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC).

The Central Fund (also termed “City Services”) is financed by Auroville’s commercial units, and income-generating services, which are expected to donate 33% of their net profit to it, a standard 'city services contribution' requested of each Aurovilian adult, as well as by the Unity Fund – a collective fund which channels grants and donations from international institutions and individuals, as well as pools and invests contributions and reserves of Auroville commercial units.<sup>15</sup> It is allocated to community development and member maintenances (stipends) in the service sector, which differs from the commercial in that it does not operate with the intention of generating a profit, and is designed to meet the needs of Aurovilians.<sup>16</sup>

Services belong to one of 5 overarching categories: (1) “Prosperity Services,” which cater to the basic needs of Aurovilians, i.e. housing, health, and food, (2) “Municipal Services,” (3) “Administrative Services,” (4) “Education and Culture Services,” (5) “Outreach Services,” which attend to the guest industry, the bioregion, and promotion/fundraising for Auroville.<sup>17</sup> Services were originally intended to be fully centrally supported, so that they could offer free provisions to community members, based on Mira Alfassa’s guiding directives that there would be no exchange of money between Aurovilians and that the basic needs of each would be borne by the collective. In the last decade, noting that centrally supported services were a drain on the Central Fund,

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<sup>15</sup> “Unity Fund and Auroville Fund,” last modified March 16, 2015, <http://www.auroville.org/contents/2836>

<sup>16</sup> “Budget Coordination Committee,” accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.auroville.org/contents/3158>.

<sup>17</sup> “Overview of Auroville’s Service Landscape,” accessed March 16, 2015, <http://www.auroville.org/contents/3287>.

certain services were requested to become “self-supporting”: although they did not operate with the intention of generating a profit, they had to generate enough income to meet their operational costs. In practice this has resulted in certain Services requiring a fixed or scaling contribution from Aurovilians to avail of their services provided.<sup>18</sup>

Central Fund maintenances are currently split in ‘cash’ and in ‘kind.’ The ‘cash’ portion is money that can be withdrawn by individuals and used freely, the ‘kind’ portion represents a credit that can be used at certain Auroville facilities, for example, the “lunch scheme,” which individuals can choose to avail of at any participating Auroville eatery. Commercial units are responsible for funding the maintenances of Aurovilians working in their sector, since they are income generating.<sup>19</sup>

Parallels between Marx’s communist economic system and the centralized Auroville economic system are obvious. Marx proclaims “*Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society: all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labor of others by means of such appropriation.*”<sup>20</sup> This thinking is directly implemented in the communal Auroville economic system as described so far: Aurovilians works for the benefit of the community, and in exchange for their work, they receive a stipend (“Maintenance”) from the common fund (the “Central Fund”), split in ‘cash’ and in ‘kind,’ as well as free provisioning from a range of community services, also financially supported by the common fund. Therefore, as Marx intended, every individual benefits from the products of society, but no individual income is directly extracted from the labour of others.

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<sup>18</sup> BCC Member “Nicole,” Email message to Author, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, H. and Manuel Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008*, Auroville: Social Research Center, 2013, 83.

<sup>20</sup> Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 486.

However, this communal economic system does not represent the breadth, depth, diversity and complexity of the Auroville economy as it exists today. Whereas it is not in the scope of this paper to offer a full description or analysis of the latter, it bears noting the maintenances awarded by units to those working in the commercial sector are often higher than those awarded by the central fund to people working in the service sector, as the pervasive sentiment is that these are too low. Many Aurovilians have other sources of income or savings, and a whole range of goods and services are exchanged between Aurovilians on a monetary basis.

### *3. The Individual & the Collective: Participation and Provisions*

What Marx foresaw as the future of communism was “*From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.*”<sup>21</sup> Despite the intention explicit in this statement, that the individual’s capacity to participate and degree of need would be the decisive linchpin around which the collective would be organized, the communist system evolved into one in which what Mother refers to as ‘levelling’ would become the norm. Although she recognised the similarity between her directives for the Auroville economy and that of the communist system, this was a significant way in which she anticipated it ought to surpass it: “*It is a sort of adaptation of the communist system, but not in the spirit of leveling; according to the capacity, the position... the inner position of each one.*”<sup>22</sup>

Mother was very clear that each person residing in Auroville would participate in the collective, but that this participation would not be “*something calculated on an*

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<sup>21</sup> Haberman and Stevenson, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, 136.

<sup>22</sup> *The Mother on Auroville*, 24.



*individual basis,”* and instead “*according to one’s means.*”<sup>23</sup> To her, participation could be active or passive, in money, kind or work, and work was defined as “*an activity with a collective usefulness, not a selfish one.*”<sup>24</sup> In turn, the community would be responsible to provide for the minimum material needs of each member:

*“The organisation should be such, should be so arranged, that the material needs of everyone are assured, not according to ideas of rights or equality, but on the basis of the minimum needs. And once that is established, each one should be free to organise his life according to – not according to his financial means, but his inner capacities.”*<sup>25</sup>

In the early years of the community, a modicum of support was granted to all Aurovilians to meet minimal needs in kind, with no exchange of money. However, insufficient funds resulted in the emergence of maintenances in 1983, so that central support could be allocated specifically to those who were working for the community.<sup>26</sup> The transition from a collective provisioning to the specified maintenance system was a challenging one, as it effectively institutionalized a standardization and individualization of exchange between each community member and the collective through the allocation of money, which for many was – and still is – a contradiction with the founding principles of Auroville’s social economy.

### *For All/Pour Tous: The First Collective Provisioning Operation & Its (D)evolution*

The first collective provisioning operation of the Auroville community, “For All/Pour Tous”<sup>27</sup> was established in the early years of Auroville, on the request of a community member, Claire Fanning, who was concerned with the circulation of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with “Otto,” Financial Service Executive, May 24<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>27</sup> “Pour Tous” is the translation of “For All” into French.

money already present at that time. Claire wrote to Mother, who resided in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in neighbouring Pondicherry, in March of 1972, stating, “*If Auroville is to function fluently for need and demand without the internal exchange of monies perhaps it is time to create a ‘proper channel’.*”<sup>28</sup> Mother approved of the idea, offered the name “For All/Pour Tous” and the Sri Aurobindo Society funded the service, which opened in February of 1974, including the cost of meeting the basic food and sundry needs of Aurovilians, which was shortly thereafter borne by the community itself.<sup>29</sup>

Food and sundry items were distributed equally among community members in community baskets.<sup>30</sup> There was no exchange of money, as Aurovilians did not directly receive the funds allocated for their needs, which were instead collectively channelled into the For All/Pour Tous account.<sup>31</sup> In 1983, a decisive shift happened from a communal to an individual system in the relationship of Aurovilians with For All/Pour Tous: the operation became computerised, the maintenance system emerged, and each individual member or family unit was given an account in which to deposit funds, and encouraged to deposit these in advance of their food requirements to facilitate bulk purchasing.<sup>32</sup> The system soon came to operate like a standard grocery system model – the community basket service phased out, each individual or family shopped individually and paid for each item taken.

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<sup>28</sup> Clare Fanning, “For All/Pour Tous & the Early Years of Its Economic Development,” August 2011, archived at the Social Research Center, Auroville.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” BCC member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>32</sup> “Otto,” in Thomas, H. and Manuel Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008*, Auroville: Social Research Center, 2013, 82.

Today, Pour Tous Purchasing Service (as it is now named) is run as a “Self-supporting Service” that generates profit from Auroville consumers in order to cover its cost of operation and development.<sup>33</sup> This is a matter of contention as the profit generated is considerable and therefore PTPS has come to resemble more of a commercial unit than a service. Since this profit is derived exclusively on the basis of exchange of money with fellow Aurovilians in a sector which falls squarely in the category of basic needs, and therefore diverges from Auroville’s foundational socio-economic directives, a review and reform is being addressed by the community’s key economic groups.<sup>34</sup>

### *PTDC: Auroville’s Communal Cooperative*

#### *1. PTDC: Aspirational Alternative and Conscious Critique*

In the early 2000s, funding for a new facility for Pour Tous located in the centre of the city prompted a group of about ten concerned individuals dissatisfied with the fact that Pour Tous, as an institution, had (d)evolved into a shop – “*30 years to arrive to the point where we were just selling and buying to each other!*”<sup>35</sup> – to gather and reflect on how this new outlet could be run in a way that would re-affirm Auroville’s evolution towards the communal economy it aspired for. In the words of one of these early stakeholders

*“we realised that if we were not going to run this outlet as a community service without the exchange of money, because it was at the centre of Auroville, we could say goodbye to Auroville as a society without the exchange of money, where people are supported, they give what they can in terms of work and involvement and they receive what they need without exchange of money - which is what it’s supposed to be.”*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” BCC member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Author’s Notes on BCC meetings, May 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” PTDC Support Group member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

Whereas the existing Pour Tous was located on the outskirts of the city, the new site would form part of a central complex of services: the community kitchen “Solar Kitchen,” in which many working Aurovilians are allocated lunch as the ‘in kind’ portion of their maintenance, Nandini, a service providing clothing, linens and tailoring, the Free Store, in which people donate items and can take any at no charge. The group considered that the Pour Tous model as it existed would be incongruent with the ethos of these other services – and the socio-economic ideals of Auroville in general – and developed guidelines for a new outlet, aspiring

*“to manifest a society without the exchange of money. Where the needs of the people are taken care of not through monetary means but through centrally supported services that then serve the needs of the people in a flexible manner.”<sup>37</sup>*

In brief, the concept was that PTDC would operate as a cooperative, in which members would contribute a certain amount monthly, and then take whatever they felt they needed, without paying per individual items, which would be limited to ‘basic needs.’ The service would be centrally supported, and not self-supporting, meaning that the cost of operation, overhead expenses and the maintenances of Aurovilians working in the service, would be borne by the collective – the Central Fund administered by the BCC (“Economy Group” at the time).

The group presented the concept to the Economy Group with 160 people ready to participate in the experiment, and their proposal was strongly challenged for a number of reasons.<sup>38</sup> One was the general concern of the time, that fully supported services were too much of a drain on the collective economy – self-supporting services

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

were preferable.<sup>39</sup> Another was that the PTDC model, which was based on membership, did not warrant collective funds.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, it was anticipated that the model of participation would be abused; people would take more than they contributed, the service would end up financially overdrawn, and the Central Fund would be compelled to bear the cost.<sup>41</sup> For a PTDC Support Group member active at the time, the underlying issue was ideological: “*do you want people in Auroville to pay for what they get or do you want them to be supported by the community?*”<sup>42</sup>

After difficult meetings, the Economy Group decided to award the new Pour Tous a small budget – Rs 17,000 – and a time for experimentation.<sup>43</sup> The service began to operate in 2006 with many working on voluntary basis,<sup>44</sup> and membership more than doubled in the first year.<sup>45</sup> At the end of that year, in 2007, the Economy Group called for a General Meeting – a meeting of all community members that constitutes the ultimate mechanism of decision-making in Auroville – to determine whether the experiment should continue to run and be supported by the Central Fund.<sup>46</sup> According to a member of the group active in launching PTDC, the Economy Group was “certain” that the outcome of the meeting would be the end of the PTDC experiment, and that that was their motive for calling it. However, the community at large ended up resonating with PTDC:

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” PTDC Support Group member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with “Joseba,” former member of Economy Group, May 13<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” PTDC Support Group member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas and Thomas, *Economics for People and Earth: The Auroville Case, 1968-2008*, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

*“What works in Auroville is when you have actually a small group of people who are cognizant of what they are doing and who really try to work it out in detail and come to the community with something that makes sense, and that’s congruent with what Auroville is supposed to be, is understanding of the possibilities and limitations of today, and is able to come up with a project that can stand. And if you do that you have people behind you... because you still have a majority of people in Auroville who really come for these ideals. So when something happens like that, there is a resonance. There was a resonance in that meeting. It was like, ‘Yeah, this is what we want.’”<sup>47</sup>*

## 2. PTDC: The Model

Ten years later, PTDC operates as a centrally supported service, with a monthly budget of Rs 53,000 allocated by the BCC from the Central Fund. Membership has grown to 1300 people, which represents the majority of the Auroville population.<sup>48</sup> PTDC identifies itself as a “community cooperative,” and fits the definition:

*“community cooperatives are those which meet three requirements: they are citizen (community)-owned, provide or manage community goods, and warrant non-discriminatory access to them.”<sup>49</sup>*

PTDC – like all infrastructure, assets, and economic operations in Auroville – is ‘owned’ by the Auroville Foundation, and therefore, by the community at large; it provides the basic food and sundry necessities for community members; it is open to all Aurovilians, Newcomers,<sup>50</sup> and long-term Volunteers<sup>51</sup>. PTDC also defines itself as a ‘distribution centre.’ This is because the service does not ‘sell’ the goods it acquires for its members (“participants”) to them, although their contributions fund the purchase of these items.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” PTDC Support Group member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Mori, P., “Community and Cooperation: The Evolution of Cooperatives Towards New Models of Citizens’ Democratic Participation in Public Services Provision,” *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, No. 85, Vol.3: 2014, pp. 342.

<sup>50</sup> People in the process of becoming Aurovilian.

<sup>51</sup> People who are not community members, but residing and volunteering in Auroville for a period of at least 3 months.

Participants choose from one of three fixed monthly contributions, as approximates their needs.<sup>52</sup> The standard (medium) contribution was determined on the basis of the in-kind ‘lunch scheme’ allocation of the Central Fund maintenance. The funds are collected into a single common account and are used to purchase a range of items according to certain criteria that correspond to the category of ‘basic needs,’ as determined by the PTDC management. Participants may select any of the items available in the cooperative, and their selection is tracked at a checkout counter - – for stocktaking purposes and to monitor the usage of each participant – although no statement is provided.

Participants are expected to contribute in relationship to their usage, which is posted 3 times a month on the public notice board at the entrance of the cooperative on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and last day of each month. Usage represents the tally of the cost of the items selected by the participant to date. Participants who consistently “overuse” are requested to increase their contribution, and participants who have more and need less are invited to contribute beyond their usage to support those who have less and need more.<sup>53</sup> All items at PTDC are made available to participants at a cost-price value. This does not include any operational expenses of the service (i.e. transport, maintenances, infrastructure repairs), since these are covered by the Central Fund.

No item in PTDC carries a price, as the service would like people to focus on their needs without being influenced by the price of items. However, a binder with the pricing list for all PTDC items is available for people to consult. One of the key criteria for the selection of items available at PTDC is affordability, so that individuals

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Minimum’ (Rs. 2300 for adults, Rs. 1200 for children), ‘Medium’ (Rs. 3000 for adults) or ‘Maximum’ (Rs. 4000 for adults, Rs. 2000 for children).

<sup>53</sup> *Pour Tous Distribution Concept Paper*, n.d. Emailed to Author by PTDC management.

subsisting on the modest Auroville maintenance – the economic demographic PTDC is designed to serve – would be able to provide for their daily life while remaining within their PTDC contribution budget. Participants receiving a maintenance may request that its ‘in kind’ provision be made available to them at PTDC as part of their contribution.

In addition to seeking to align with the provisos that there should be no exchange of money between Aurovilians and that the each person’s basic needs would be provided for, PTDC also bases its selection and distribution model on a statement by Mother, “*Auroville is meant not for the satisfaction of desires, but for the growth of the true consciousness,*” on display at the cooperative.<sup>54</sup> Aside from affordability, other criteria for selection of goods reflect “conscious” consumer choices: health, quality and eco-friendliness. PTDC attempts to strike a balance between meeting people’s needs without upholding a uniformity of needs while at the same time not encouraging a “consumer society,” by offering a small range of items per category.<sup>55</sup> Auroville products are prioritized, and several Auroville commercial units offer their goods at cost or at a discount. The ‘spirit of service’ is a key criteria for the acceptance of items proposed by Aurovilians; PTDC seeks to avoid goods whose prices are inflated in order to derive profit on purchase, as this goes against the ideals of service and fraternity that are at the core of the cooperative.<sup>56</sup> PTDC also has a kitchen, largely staffed by volunteers, in which it prepares healthy, cost-price lunches and prepared food items for its members – which prevents any left-over fruit and vegetables from going to waste – and a recycling centre for the containers of PTDC items (i.e. jars, bottles, plastic boxes) to be returned and re-used.

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<sup>54</sup> *Pour Tous Distribution Concept Paper*, n.d. Emailed to Author by PTDC Executive.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with “Nicole,” PTDC Support Group member, April 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.



### 3. PTDC: In Practice

#### Methodology

What does the PTDC model achieve, in practice? To investigate this question, I conducted a total of 20 in-depth interviews with people who belonged to the categories of PTDC participants, PTDC Support Group and management, BCC members, Economy Action Group members, executives of units who contribute their items at cost price to PTDC, and Auroville farmers supplying to PTDC. I also reviewed all comments and feedback about PTDC made on Auroville's internal blog, *Auronet*; PTDC management shared with me emails with participant feedback, and sent an email to their mailing list on my behalf informing them of my research and inviting participants to contact me directly, which resulted in a number of exchanges. I also reviewed a survey conducted on PTDC in 2010,<sup>57</sup> a year-end report published by PTDC on *Auronet* for 2014,<sup>58</sup> and a food and community distribution study<sup>59</sup> and survey<sup>60</sup> conducted by the Auroville Residents Assembly Service in 2016. A participant of the PTDC cooperative myself, I conducted auto-ethnographic research as a participant-observer, with the informed consent of the PTDC community.

#### Conscious Atmosphere & Community Space

One thing that all participants seem to experience, at least to a certain extent, and that differentiates PTDC from any other outlet, is that the atmosphere feels “conscious” – something which people attribute to the selection of products, the

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<sup>57</sup> *Results of the PTDC August Survey*, 20 Sep 2010, [www.auroville.org.in/article/23850](http://www.auroville.org.in/article/23850).

<sup>58</sup> *PTDC year report 2014: some interesting facts and figures*, 13 March 2015, [www.auroville.org.in/article/47604](http://www.auroville.org.in/article/47604).

<sup>59</sup> Residents Assembly Service, *Food and Commodity Distribution*, 2016, [www.ras.auroville.org.in/food-distribution](http://www.ras.auroville.org.in/food-distribution).

<sup>60</sup> Residents Assembly Service, *Food Distribution Survey – Results*, 8 Feb 2016, [www.auroville.org.in/article/55767](http://www.auroville.org.in/article/55767).

intention and attitude of those working there, and the comportment of other participants – and that the space fostered a shared sense of community. In a survey of all food outlets in Auroville, 71% answered that their “main” reason for going to PTDC was “Aspiration and Principles,” as compared to 20% at PTPS, and 8% at a third location.<sup>61</sup> According to previous research, the majority of PTDC participants were satisfied with the selection of items.<sup>62</sup> I found that they were happy with the selection primarily because a consciousness was put into choosing items along criteria relevant in the Auroville context, and for environmental concerns at large.<sup>63</sup> People felt especially satisfied with the choice of Auroville goods because, knowing and trusting the people producing these gave them a sense of connection to the items and to one another.<sup>64</sup> Many participants noted that the attitude of those working there – a team of exclusively Aurovilians, Newcomers and Volunteers, with no hired labour from outside the community – reflected a genuine sense of “connection” with their work, and that their “dedication,” “effort” and “intention” reverberated into the atmosphere of PTDC as a whole, which one person described as “energetically beautiful.”<sup>65</sup>

The physical space itself was intentionally designed with all shelving along the walls and a largely free and empty space in the middle, consciously avoiding conventional supermarket rows that do not invite people to pause or interact comfortably with others, to create instead an informal community meeting space.

Interaction between participants is the norm, many greeting one another with affection

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> 61% in the PTDC survey.

<sup>63</sup> “SA,” PTDC Participant, Email message to Author, May 11<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with “D,” PTDC participant, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Interviews with “D,” “A,” “Martina” and “Uma,” respectively.

and entering into conversation – ranging from personal matters to those of concern in community life and functioning, something which is further facilitated by the lunch service at PTDC, in which people converse in line and while eating at shared tables. In one participant’s words, PTDC is a space to “check in with the community” and its “current vibe.”<sup>66</sup>

### Economic Model: Support & Criticism

Opinions differ strongly, however, when it comes to PTDC’s economic set-up and functioning. “Supporters” feel that PTDC represents a significant step towards the future of the Auroville economy in terms of the realization of its ideals,<sup>67</sup> whereas “critics” challenge its economic model as a step towards no exchange of money.

#### *a) Support*

Supporters highlight PTDC as the first major breakthrough towards an economy with no exchange of money. Uma, a participant and member of one of Auroville’s economic think tanks<sup>68</sup> stated

*“what this new Pour Tous has done is it’s managed to make a certain entry into that new economy and held it. And make it work and make it really work – it has crossed over this survival crunch... it has landed in the consciousness of people. And that I find a space for celebration.”<sup>69</sup>*

Ann, a participant who managed Pour Tous from 1983 to 1990, considers PTDC to be “the future of the Auroville economy;”

*“In any case of what I call the base economy – food, education, health... and I think PTDC will one day cover all this, and perhaps even go further. I don’t yet have the vision of that, I am not an economist. But for me it is obvious that PTDC is that.”<sup>70</sup>*

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<sup>66</sup> “U,” PTDC participant, Email message to Author, May 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with “A,” PTDC participant, May 16<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>68</sup> “Economy Action Group”

<sup>69</sup> Interview with “Uma,” PTDC participant, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with “Ann,” PTDC participant, May 16<sup>th</sup> 2016.

I asked these “supporters” what about their experience of PTDC as a participant inspired this support. Uma highlighted how PTDC fulfils the mandate of ensuring that meeting the basic needs of Aurovilians would be insured, by pointing to

*“The way it allows the collective to transcend a survival space, which in economy is always – “how much,” “how I live,” “what are my living costs” - and the whole life revolves around this self-pity of living. For me, PTDC allows me to transcend that... PTDC gives me that freedom to look at life in another level. And I’m utterly grateful.”<sup>71</sup>*

For Ann, PTDC is a progression towards no exchange of money in Auroville, as it is

*“something that brings us together, that unifies us, a sharing story. For me I couldn’t care less at the end of the month when my balance is positive that it goes to the common pot, I find that fantastic... It’s no longer me or you, we are one. We are one. It’s the collective.”*

Others highlight the fact that PTDC acts as a platform that invites an actualization of Auroville’s ideals. PTDC manager Anandi observes, contrary to the assumption that “human nature” would lead people to take advantage of the system

*I’ve seen here so much... goodwill. Where would that goodwill have been expressed if Pour Tous would not have been there, where? In the supermarket, getting a beer? So not only you create a space where that can happen, it’s also – it invites. And that for me is very important. If we don’t create the space that calls for that, how are we expecting it manifest? In a supermarket? That would be a real miracle!”<sup>72</sup>*

The executives of Maroma, the highest contributing commercial unit to the community since it was founded in the 70s, also acknowledge PTDC’s unique role and potential in Auroville’s communal economy.<sup>73</sup> Laura notes that the spirit of service behind PTDC, concretized in the model of offering items at cost price exclusively to Aurovilians, enables them to offer Maroma products to the community where there were no channels through which to do so otherwise.<sup>74</sup> Paul considers PTDC to be “a great movement of the moment” and foresees that it could become “one of the main

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with “Uma,” PTDC participant, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with “Paul” & “Laura,” executives of Maroma, cost-price contributing unit to PTDC, May 9<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>74</sup> “Laura,” May 9<sup>th</sup> 2016.

*actors*” anchoring the communal economy Auroville strives for.<sup>75</sup> Margarita, an executive of MG Ecoduties, an Auroville unit that develops environmentally-friendly soaps and household detergents and supplies these at cost to PTDC, says she does so because she strongly believes in a gift economy for Auroville, and PTDC is creating a paradigm shift in this regard, as it is a model based on values of the gift economy and not on a capitalistic system.<sup>76</sup>

*b) Criticism*

Others fail to see how the economic model of PTDC is a move towards “no exchange of money” or a collective economy, because each person contributes in money, their consumption is individually tracked on the basis of the cost of the items they select, and they are expected to contribute more if their expenditure does not meet their budget.<sup>77</sup> However, several participants raised the point that this criticism indicated a failure not of PTDC in and of itself, but of the context in which it is embedded – the Auroville economy as it is structured today, with a system of maintenances that are provided primarily in money and that are channelled into individual accounts, so that individuals are left largely to provide for their basic needs using money, and furthermore with an amount of money with which it is hard to make ends meet.<sup>78</sup>

Another point of contention is PTDC’s ‘no pricing policy,’ which creates anxiety in some about the relationship between their usage and contribution – although

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<sup>75</sup> “Paul,” May 9<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with “Margarita,” PTDC participant and executive of MG Ecoduties, cost-price contributing unit to PTDC, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with “D,” PTDC participant, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with “P,” PTDC participant and former member of the Economy Group, May 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

I received no negative feedback regarding the requested amount of the contributions, and survey results indicated that 75% were positive about the contribution system as a whole. Despite there being a binder in the cooperative at all times with a pricing list, and people's usage being posted three times a month, some participants feel that not having individual items' prices marked and not receiving itemized statements makes it challenging for them to be conscious about their usage, and they consider that counterproductive.

*"I have never understood how the 'no exchange of money' idea of PTDC precludes putting the price on items. Especially when everyone is expected to keep within the limits of the monthly contribution that they make. With this expectation, why refuse to put the one piece of information on each item that will help participants to keep within their budget?"<sup>79</sup>*

On the other hand, Ann expresses that it encourages each participant to be conscious:

*"it forces us to be conscious about what we are doing.... There are people who complain afterwards, saying how come you don't show the prices? It is up to us to be conscious. And why do I like this PTDC – it's that. It's an adventure, also, of consciousness."<sup>80</sup>*

PTDC manager Anandi points out that when people begin their membership, and she asks them what their monthly budget is, most don't know – even though they have been shopping at outlets with prices. To her, that is an indication that pricing each item does not actually amount to one being conscious of one's expenditure.

Anandi recognizes that this experiment they ask people to participate in – *"how much do you take when you don't need to look at prices? What is it that you need? How do you react when you are confronted with that shelf which doesn't say any price?"* –,

basing choice on need and not on prices is challenging for many.<sup>81</sup> For some, the exercise is flawed because every item does have a cost, and it may be beyond their

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<sup>79</sup> Priya, comment on *Auronet* entry "A case for labeling all produce at PTDC," 23 Oct 2014, <https://www.auroville.org.in/article/44934>.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with "Ann," PTDC participant, May 16<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with "Anandi," PTDC manager, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

budget, and therefore disproportionate with their needs.<sup>82</sup> Others feel that it is an advantage not to see the prices because it allows them to think differently, and that being reminded of the limits of their budget “*is necessary at this stage of our consciousness as very few of us may claim that they will take only what they absolutely need!*”<sup>83</sup> Many are relieved at not seeing prices, because it eliminates an unnecessary consideration – in the words of one economist, participant at PTDC, “*there are more interesting things in this world to be interested in than the fluctuating price of onions*”<sup>84</sup> – and many do not track their expenditure on a monthly basis, for the same reasons, and feel that having PTDC take care of monitoring expenditure on their behalf is another step towards a communally organized economy.<sup>85</sup>

### *Conclusion*

What I found most interesting as an outcome of ethnographic research is that regardless of whether people considered that the economic model of PTDC was a step in the direction of the socio-economic ideals of the community, they felt a sense of intention and connection manifest at the cooperative which I would consider to be, ideally, the aspiration of any Auroville institution striving to actualize the township’s overarching missive: the evolution of consciousness.

What I have come to formulate as a fair statement regarding its current economic set-up is that there is no exchange of money for the service rendered by PTDC – something that the original team was very adamant about ensuring by having

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<sup>82</sup> “S,” PTDC participant, Email message to Author, May 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>83</sup> “SA,” PTDC participant, Email message to Author, May 11<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with “Torkil,” PTDC participant and Unity Fund Executive, May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with “Chali,” PTDC participant, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2016.

the Central Fund provide for the cost of the operation.<sup>86</sup> This communal support enables an alternative to the capitalist “shop” model that PTDC was born to embody, in part as an act of conscious resistance to the invasion of a market economy within Auroville and compromising its socio-economic ideals.

*“... when you are distributing basic food, that you have to pay, with your basic food at the same time the person who brings it – when it is a member of the community like you... then when you go to the school you also pay for the teacher – or you go to the health centre and of course you pay for the doctor. The whole world, everything, housing – become monetized. Everything. Things that always have been community supported. So we have to be very vigilant in Auroville.”<sup>87</sup>*

Furthermore, it has created a new and unparalleled platform into which Auroville’s commercial units feel they can contribute effectively and directly to the community – something that is also inspired by PTDC’s track-record of management transparency<sup>88</sup> and efficiency.<sup>89</sup> Although this is currently a “cost-price” contribution model, several unit executives with profitable businesses expressed that they foresaw donating their products to PTDC.<sup>90</sup> In this way PTDC prepares for what could eventually become a communal cooperative with no exchange of money for the very goods themselves – and so no exchange of money at all. Units who would not be able to donate their products in addition to their 33% contribution to the Central Fund could make it an ‘in-kind’ contribution that would be calculated as part of their 33%, a mechanism that already exists for other communal provisions. Although, as one unit executive pointed out, few commercial units produce basic goods items that would be of use to the community, those that do not could contribute in cash towards the

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC manager, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Anandi, PTDC manager, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with “Margarita,” PTDC participant and Executive of MG Ecoduties, cost-price contributing unit to PTDC, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>89</sup> 0.2% waste. *PTDC year report 2014: some interesting facts and figures*, 13 March 2015, [www.auroville.org.in/article/47604](http://www.auroville.org.in/article/47604).

<sup>90</sup> Maroma and Naturellement.



purchase of such items that may be lacking. It bears noting that Pour Tous, in its infancy, set the precedent for the practice of units contributing towards the collective; Claire Fanning had reached an agreement with all Auroville units that they could contribute a certain percentage directly to the service.<sup>91</sup> It also aligns with Mother's directive for the participation of industries in Auroville:

*“The industries will participate actively, they will contribute. If they are industries providing articles that aren't in constant need – and are therefore in amounts or numbers too great for the township's own use, so that they will be sold outside –those industries must naturally participate through money. And I take the example of food: those who produce food will give the township what it needs (in proportion to what they produce, of course) and it is the township's responsibility to feed everyone.”<sup>92</sup>*

This could form part of an evolution away from an individual and towards a communal responsibility for the provision of the basic needs of community members, as she intended.

PTDC hopes to support such a trend, envisaging that the Central Fund could allocate a 'basic needs' contribution for community members at the cooperative, now that a collective budget has been ascertained through the use of one account for purchase of goods.<sup>93</sup> Some PTDC participants already have their contribution allocated to the cooperative from the cash and/or in-kind portion of their maintenance before the latter is disbursed to their individual accounts. One participant points out that PTDC's economic structure is such that it could be flipped easily to become a centrally funded provisioning system.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Clare Fanning, “For All/Pour Tous & the Early Years of Its Economic Development,” August 2011.

<sup>92</sup> *The Mother on Auroville*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with “Anandi,” PTDC Executive, April 14<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with “Peter,” PTDC participant, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2016.

PTDC has also created a viable avenue through which individual community members who have the means and inclination to do so can contribute to the collective. A clear indicator towards a willingness to participate in a communal economic system is the feedback I received from several PTDC participants who mentioned being delighted when they do not use up the total of their contribution, knowing it will go into the collective pot. In addition, PTDC manager Anandi shared with me that when collective usage is higher than collective contributions, she appeals to the participants at large asking them to consider if they could use less or contribute more, and that people who do not overuse come forward offering to make a higher monthly contribution because they know it will be used by others. Many also contribute in work and in kind, in addition to money – bringing fruits and vegetables from their home gardens or orchards and volunteering in the cooperative, often in the kitchen – so that, interestingly, PTDC creates a space through which people do participate in the three specific ways Mother delineated for Auroville.

To further move away from individuation and resolve the inconsistency that arises between the ideals and current economic set-up of PTDC, where members are invited to take on the basis of need and not of cost, but are individually tracked and expected to cover expenditures in excess of contributions, I would recommend the cooperative experiment with a “no-tracking” policy. To be practicable, it would be complemented by a tag on items that cost over a certain amount defined as ‘expensive’ in consideration of a budget for overall basic needs, as these seemed to be the often unexpected and avoidable reason for overusage. Some participants thought that many would not be conscious and responsible enough for it to be a success, others believed

that although it might be challenging at first, it would even out and work in the long run. The fact that PTDC overall is a success despite previous concerns of a similar nature I find encouraging, and the fact that the Auroville charter defines it as a site for research in human unity warrants such an experiment.

I term PTDC a “participatory platform for conscious citizenship” because it creates a space that connects and enables Aurovilians to participate in shaping and embodying the conscious society each aspires for as a collective. Furthermore, the initiative emerged from concerned community members who sought to actively reclaim and concretize an aspiration towards a communal economy for Auroville as envisaged by its founder. As such it is indicative of a social phenomenon paralleled by other community cooperatives throughout the world, for which at the core is “citizen participation in the provision of general interest services not provided by either the market or the government,” and for which reasons these are regarded as “part of the broader phenomenon of active citizenship.”<sup>95</sup> In the case of PTDC, I consider the citizenship exhibited by Aurovilians to be not only ‘active’ but ‘conscious’ in that it intentionally seeks to embody the ideal society striven for, and as such responds to a deeper level of social ‘need’ than that of basic provisioning for the community – the realization of its collective aspiration.

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<sup>95</sup> Mori, “Community and Cooperation: The Evolution of Cooperatives Towards New Models of Citizens’ Democratic Participation in Public Services Provision,” 346.

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