

Fieldwork Report

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Governance Conflict and State Intervention in Auroville

This document presents the methodological overview and key findings of a field investigation conducted in Auroville, India, during February and March 2025. The inquiry focused on the governance conflict that has intensified since 2021, analysing Auroville as a site where multiple and overlapping regimes of authority intersect and contest one another. Particular attention was given to how competing configurations of power and discourse mediate the tension between Auroville's utopian aspirations and the pressures of capitalist co-optation. This tension has been increasingly shaped by the expanding role of state intervention in the community's internal governance mechanisms. The analysis further examines how these dynamics shape the experiences of the local Tamil population, whose asymmetrical inclusion in the project exemplifies elite-subaltern relations characterised by economic marginalisation, political exclusion, and cultural invisibility.

1. Methodological Overview

The fieldwork comprised 2 stages, each involving 3 focus group sessions. Each session extended over 7 days, including an initial phase of preparation and facilitation, followed by thematic discussion and analysis. Sessions were conducted in Tamil and English, and the data were subsequently transcribed, coded, and systematically analysed. The sessions engaged with both actors structurally marginalized in decision-making processes (Tamil workers and villagers) and those involved in institutional governance.

The fieldwork was organised into 2 stages. The first stage, conducted in February 2025, focused on Tamil stakeholders, specifically targeting three groups: Tamil workers employed in Auroville, residents of the surrounding Tamil villages, and Tamil individuals who hold official resident status within Auroville (Tamil Aurovilians). The second stage, carried out in March 2025, involved governance stakeholders actively engaged in institutional roles. This included members of the Working Committee as well as government officials responsible for administering the Auroville Foundation.

2. Key Findings

I argue that the governance conflict observed since 2021 must be understood within the sociological context of intentional communities transitioning from charismatic leadership toward institutionalization. Central tensions arise primarily from competing claims to legitimacy, specifically between spiritual-charismatic and legal-rational forms of authority. These tensions have caused sustained institutional paralysis and discursive fragmentation, exploited strategically by various actors seeking control over resources, administrative processes, and interpretations of the community's foundational vision.

A key finding concerns the conflict between spiritual-charismatic authority, often invoked by long-term Aurovilians who emphasize adherence to The Mother's foundational vision, and legal-rational authority, primarily asserted by state-appointed actors. This divergence has resulted in parallel governance bodies, notably the existence of competing Working Committees, creating administrative impasses and ongoing legal conflicts. Another key finding concerns how the conflict reinforces economic, political, and cultural marginalization for the local Tamil population. Despite formal commitments to recognition and inclusion, Tamil residents and workers remain peripheral, experiencing governance conflicts predominantly through employment instability, land insecurity and exclusion from decision-making processes. 4 key dimensions shaping the conflict emerged from the participatory survey and focus groups conducted over 2 months: epistemic, legal, spatial, and affective, each significantly affecting the Tamil population.

The epistemic dimension involves disputes over who holds the legitimacy to interpret Auroville's founding and evolving vision, primarily contested between two dominant forms of authority: spiritual-charismatic and legal-rational. Long-standing Aurovilians assert their legitimacy, emphasizing their historical proximity to The Mother (the founder) as justification for their interpretations. Conversely, government-aligned stakeholders ground their authority in statutory documents and formal planning frameworks, such as the Galaxy Plan. Tamil residents remain systematically marginalized within these disputes. Their participation in community debates shaped by spiritual truth-claims is deemed illegitimate, while their access to administrative roles within the community's internal governance is constrained by lower levels of formal education, limited English proficiency, and exclusionary decision-making processes. Each of these barriers is reinforced and justified by the dominant forms of authority.

The legal dimension centers on conflicting interpretations of the Auroville Foundation Act (1988), which grants supreme authority to both the Residents' Assembly and the government-appointed Governing Board. This has resulted in several legal cases filed by both sides, with community proponents advocating participatory deliberation, while government officials emphasize statutory compliance and alignment with national development policies. Competing Working Committees, one appointed by the Residents' Assembly and the other by the Auroville Foundation, illustrate this institutional division, resulting in administrative deadlocks and widespread uncertainty. These conflicts have led to frozen resident accounts, the removal of roles and salaries, and the displacement of Tamil workers and residents. Tamil workers have disproportionately suffered from employment insecurity and economic vulnerability due to ongoing community conflicts, central government intervention, and uncertainty surrounding legal processes.

The spatial dimension encompasses conflicts over land use, infrastructure projects, and environmental concerns, exemplified by community opposition to the Crown Road development. Tamil residents express anxieties over displacement, restricted access to resources, and exclusion from planning processes. Tamil workers emphasize spatial inequalities exacerbated by Auroville's expansion and ongoing urbanization, which aims to accommodate up to 50,000 residents. These inequalities stem from land acquisition and infrastructure development projects justified by ecological and developmental rationales, both of which systematically marginalize local village populations. This process has displaced traditional agricultural subsistence economies, reducing Tamil natives to subaltern workers on their own ancestral lands.

Finally, the affective dimension encapsulates political deliberation and reasoning, marked by mistrust, polarization, and factionalism. Legal arguments are often dismissed as bureaucratic and detached from community realities, while spiritual justifications are criticized as irrational and exclusionary. Tamil workers in particular express emotional fatigue, fear, and skepticism, both toward central government officials and long-standing community leaders. Tamil residents of Auroville are often instrumentalized by both sides, either as symbols of inclusivity or as beneficiaries of development, to justify opposing political agendas. In this context, the promise of Auroville is increasingly at risk, as the community becomes vulnerable to statist intervention and technocratic development. To sum up, this fieldwork was crucial to my thesis argument on how intentional communities are increasingly shaped by mechanisms of capitalist co-optation in the 21st century.