

Hard times for varagu and other millets

Last year we lost heavily in the area of cultivating millets: the kudravalli crop which was poor to begin with, was fully destroyed by the peacocks; varagu (kodo millet) crop yields were 50% less and of poor quality because of too little rain and some wildlife damage. Also, processing the poor crop will give less return and take more labour to complete. Even in good years these crops are hardly breaking even because of low yields and increasing labor cost.

If the weather looks good we might do a small area of varagu this year but we cannot afford to grow it on a larger scale any longer. We will try to purchase varagu in the bio region after



the monsoon, but even that might prove difficult.

If Auroville is really serious about wanting varagu grown on its farms we need to make a very comprehensive assessment, as well as commit ourselves as a community, financially, to develop systems which are in the long run doable. Required investments will never be financially viable in our current economical thinking and have to be seen in a different light.

Left to the farmers these crops will simply disappear. Residents, the consumers, need to give voice to their food requirements, and get more actively involved to help ensure these millets continue to be available. By Tomas

Annapurna Support Fund

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Even though Auroville farms largely use sprinklers and drip irrigation to reduce wastage of water, it goes without saying that our agricultural sector consumes the maximum amount of water.

Water and food are our most basic needs, and one hopes that due to the drought, one will not have to give up food cultivation in order to conserve water. Tackling such competing needs is not easy. And compounding the problem is the fact that even after 50 years,

The impact of the drought



extract from Auroville Today

Auroville does not have a community-supported vision about agriculture.

Perhaps the hardest hit farm in terms of water scarcity is our largest rice farm, Annapurna.

Rice is a water-intensive crop: paddy rice can consume eight times as much water than vegetables, but in normal monsoons most of

this water is supplied by the rain. In fact rice is one of the few crops that thrives in our heavy winter monsoon.

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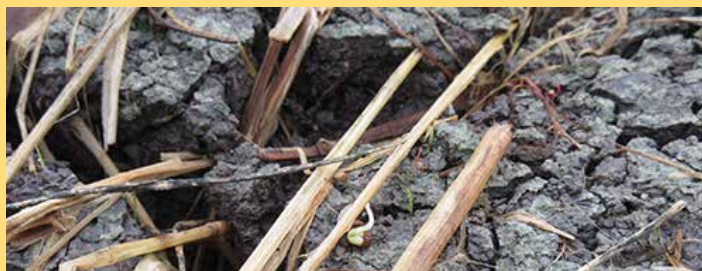
"Since we were short in water after this non-monsoon, we could not follow the normal practice to establish a green manure on the rice fields after the paddy harvest, which means there is less fodder for the animals this summer and no green manure for the next season as of now. We will look how the summer monsoon develops and see if we can grow the green manure (sans grazing) later in the season.

Peacocks and deer are doing wonderful, thriving, and enjoying the summer; there must be a hundred peacocks on the farm right now. We've seen 5 spotted deer: 2 males with wonderful antlers, along with 2 females and a calf. And oh yes the wild pigs are enjoying the mud pools in the pond.

Annapurna has reduced milk sales to the community to be able to do more processing of dairy products. This has been a decision to generate more cash to keep the farm afloat. Finances have been very challenging for the last year and we try to recover from that.

We are making daily Annafeta or/and Annafromage. Then there is the yoghurt (both classic and 401) and paneer. Two ladies are full day busy with all of that. Demand for all products is low during the summer months, as usual, but since we set up the cheesery and cold room we can deal with the seasonality in Auroville." By Tomas

Annapurna has capacity to catch and store approx. 25000 cubic meter (25 milion liters) of rain water. However, 2016 was recorded as the driest year in the past 140 years, and due to the complete failure of the winter monsoon, the ponds did not get recharged. Warning signs about water scarcity dawned as early as January, when Annapurna's steward, Tomas reported that, for the first time in 15 years, the water level in these ponds was at its lowest. The ponds are still being used to irrigate grass for fodder, but soon they will be totally dry.



Apart from these surface ponds, the farm has two deep bore wells and a shallow well. The saving grace at Annapurna is the functioning open shallow well, which gives about 10,000 liters of water per day. This well with a depth of about 12 m is supplied by the first aquifer (the Cuddalore sandstone aquifer). The re-charge zone of the first aquifer

is largely within the Auroville area, and Tomas suspects that this open well gets recharged because of over-irrigation in the neighbouring village fields. The Auroville community needs not only to decide on future directions for farming in Auroville but

also be prepared to change its dietary habits and start consuming only what can be sustainably grown. In other parts of south India, farmers are pioneering experiments into growing only climate change resilient crops. Given the fact that in a period of six years, we have experienced extreme weather events: a cyclone, a flood and now a drought - all of which adversely affected the farms, Auroville should be prepared to take bold, new steps to maximize resiliency in the uncertain era of climate change. By Bindu