

"It started from the beginning of the farm, when Bernard, who is now in Pebble Garden, gifted us a small village cow. This cow had a place next to my hut that I built in Annapurna at the end of 1986. She gave very little milk, but just enough to have some milk, yoghurt and cow dung. I even used to sell some left over milk to a local tea stall.

After people saw that I was sticking it out in a farm beyond Auroville city limits, more cows came in. Bernard brought a cow from his farm (La Ferme). Tency gave us some animals from his dairy and we got a few Gir bulls from Gloria Land (Sri Aurobindo ashram farm). So then we suddenly had a herd of cows. We built a simple cow house and grazed the animals on the vast Annapurna land which was still totally uncultivated.

As you can read somewhat out of this story, I did not so much decide to start a dairy as it kind of happened and it all felt like the right thing at that time... It took us some years to sort out what we had. We were from the beginning working with indigenous animals, but what came to us was quite a mixed lot.

In building a healthy cow herd you have to start breeding with the better animals and see the results, then select again the better ones and breed on. All this is very time consuming; if we make a decision about a cross

between a certain mother cow with a certain bull it will take many years before we see the result of this decision.



**" We are not really a dairy farm in the way it is generally understood.**

**I see us as a mixed farm, and the dairy is an integrated part of this."**

Our dairy needed 10 years of experimenting before we got the first results which gave us a clear direction where to go.

The first 15 years our dairy was not profitable at all; milk yields were too low, market was not steady and milk prices also were low. We were often considering to stop the dairy because it was financially draining the farm.

But then imagining no dairy on the farm, felt also not the right thing and we hung on.

Over the years milk production improved, but the real turning point came when we started to process the milk into products like paneer,

cheese spread and Annagio (a dry cheese like parmesan). We were pushed to start to do something with our evening milk which we were selling for very low rates to the village milk co-op because we had no means of cooling (there was no electricity in those days) and there was too little quantity to take all the way into Auroville.

At the end of the nineties Brooks started to make paneer. After a while he developed more products out of that (ie various cheese spreads and Annagio).

The processing of milk into paneer, and paneer-based products, changed the farm economics drastically. Changing from a money absorbing activity, the dairy ⇨



started to generate money, to the point that it is now the financial engine of the farm.

After the paneer revolution that ran into a crisis at one point, we invested further and created a real cheesery with a coolroom.

What happened was, we had to take care of the summer milk. This is for every dairy in Auroville a challenge. There is an incredible peak (Jan-March) and a three-month low (May-July) in milk demand, every year. In the beginning we made lots of Annagio, the dried paneer, during the summer months and good amounts would be sold through La Ferme Cheese (an Auroville unit) during the winter months. When La Ferme Cheese ran into a financial crisis they could not absorb our cheese anymore and we had to find another solution.

Then “by chance” a retired professional cheesemaker walked into the farm and helped us to make the next step. This was followed by more “good luck” when we had Carla volunteering with us a few years back. Carla is the daughter of an organic cheesemaker/farmer in Germany, and with her experience and support we could make another step into the world of dairy processing. Right now we are having around 25 animals which include 14 milking animals, a bull and young animals. Since last year we sell very little milk anymore and process 90% of our milk into various products. Our dairy product list contains 2 kinds of yoghurt, paneer, various cheese spreads, Annagio, rice pudding, Annafromage and Annafeta. We are going to experiment with a few different paneer varieties soon.” Tomas



## Rice cultivation and water update

We transplanted about 12 acres paddy recently. The target for this year is 16 acres. For a few weeks we had to slow down our operation since we emptied our ponds and needed the monsoon to kick in to be able to continue sowing and planting. But then, end of October, the first monsoon rains filled our ponds and that gives us

water to work with, for now.

The pump is still stuck in the big bore-well. We have tried to dissolve the calcium build-up by slowly dosing acid solution into the well, but with no result until now. So it looks like we will be pretty dependent on the monsoon this year; please keep your fingers crossed.



### Discover Tarun, our new volunteer

Born and raised in Chennai, I had a more or less blissful childhood being part of my peaceful middle class family. As I was finishing school, I was sure of only one thing, my affinity towards greenery. I had worked in the Guindy National Park conducting a study on my 12th standard summer holidays and decided I wanted to work with wildlife after. I ventured around India henceforth conducting various research projects oriented toward nature conservation. During the 2nd year of my master's at Pondy University doing ecology and environmental sciences, I began to immerse myself more and more into farming .

On completing my master's course by April 2016 I have been farm-hopping all over Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. This eventually brought me to Auroville as a volunteer; Sacred Groves during the summer of 2017 and then Annapurna farm since mid-september. The amazing animals (humans included), yummy cheese/ yoghurt (thayir) and the unbinding characteristic that it offers seems to have yet again entranced me and might keep me here for quite some time to come.