

Newsletter

Auroville Village Action Group

Towards Solidarity and Unity

AVAG's Unique Exchange Program

Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) strives towards bringing solidarity and unity among communities through various interventions. It's wide network of 6,000 women and men who are members of Self Help Groups, are often provided with opportunities like training programs and awareness sessions where they are made to engage with people from different social groups, thus creating a platform of an equal environment and building inter-caste and inter-cultural friendships.

One of programs that directly addresses caste discrimination is the Exchange Program which happens at least four times every month at different villages. These exchange programs bring women from different caste and dalit groups together on a common platform. The approach of this program is toward inclusiveness and breaking cultural and social barriers by recognising their commonness as women and set the seeds of lifetime friendships.

Over a period of time, these exchange programs have become popular among communities of the villages nearby and more and more people are participating each time. On the day of the exchange, the women either host or visit each others villages. Preparations for the program start a day in advance with the hosts cleaning up their homes and common areas and preparing tea and food for the guests. Participants take the day off from their work to experience the program. They eat food together, play games and have discussions on a specific social issue like child protection, handling finances and equal treatment towards boys and girls. In the end, the guests visit the homes of the hosts and tour the village.

The Exchange programs also provide a platform for discussion and dialogue between groups that traditionally would have little opportunity to interact due to stigma and culture taboos families from lower caste backgrounds. Thus, by building a communication between these groups, they learn to see each other just as women, and not as women from different castes and social groups.

What makes this program unique is that it is not offered by any other NGO due to the sensitivity of the caste issue in Indian culture. It is due to our deep-rooted network and good will created among the community that we are able to execute a program of this nature.

About us



Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has worked in the villages surrounding Auroville since 1983 to promote village development and empowerment, by way of programmes in the areas of Community Development, Economic Development, Capacity Building, and Psychosocial Services, which are executed through an expanding network of self-help groups (SHGs), a Federation of women and men leaders. The emphasis is not on charity or service, but co-development with villagers to cultivate the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to build a better future for all.



The meaning of Pongal in the lives of rural women

Pongal or Thai Pongal is a harvest festival dedicated to the Sun and is celebrated widely in South India.

This day marks the start of the sun's six-month-long journey northwards. The four day long festival is mainly celebrated to convey appreciation to the Sun, land and cattle for their roles in the lives of farmers. Part of the celebration is making the first rice of the season from the harvest, which is a concoction of rice, milk, cardamom, raisins, jaggery and cashew nuts.

The festival has a variety of diverse traditions like cooking the pongal rice, decorating cows, making colourful Kolams at the entrance of houses and visiting elders and families and getting their blessings



Pongal is a very special festival for AVAG and is celebrated with great fervour each year. The celebration begins at the AVAG office where women from over 300 Self Help Groups (SHG) come together along with volunteers and representatives from Auroville.

"This is a day when we get to take a break from our daily chores and come together to play sports and participate in different cultural activities. I start my day by decorating my home and as a tradition, paint the horns of my cows." says Jayanti, who hails from Vasantapuram village. "We wait for Pongal every year as it is a big ceremony for us and brings us joy and the chance to celebrate with each other" she adds.

When asked what meaning Pongal holds in her life, Boma Devi says, *"The festival is no longer the same as it was many years before. You can see the meaning of Pongal fading away slowly, especially in urban regions. The rural people are still trying to preserve the culture and maintain the meaning of this festival for future generations."*

The women participated in different games and cultural activities and dressed up in sarees with flowers adorning their hair.



Village Action Diaries



We asked Mina, one of the Women's Federation member, about her experience of participating in the exchange program. Here's what she had to say:

"I have always wanted to be able to take care of people and work together, be able to express the energy towards my work. The exchange program gives me a chance to do so. We share problems with each other, meditate together and are able to feel the power of unity towards each other. After participating in this program, I don't feel that other women are strangers. I feel like they are my sisters. It's like a family!"

Caroline's Story

Meet Caroline, a student from American University of Paris, who volunteered with us in January :

"Working with AVAG was an unforgettable experience for me. I had the opportunity to work with the team, particularly in communications, during my one month in Auroville. I was inspired to join the team, as I felt an immediate connection to the projects that AVAG is working on, in particular, the Kabaddi program for women. I helped develop a social media strategy for the team in order to promote the wonderful and unique programs offered by AVAG. Getting to work with the team and seeing how these programs impact the surrounding villages really showed me the importance of NGOs, like AVAG, that are working towards sustainable development goals. I feel so inspired to continue helping different NGOs that are making opportunities available to women that they would not have had otherwise. I dream of coming back to Auroville and continuing my work at AVAG. I would love to conduct statistical research and to examine the results of these programs over a period of time. Until then, I cannot thank the team at AVAG enough for all they have given me and taught me in such a short time. AVAG is truly one of a kind."



The latest buzz from our social enterprise



AVAL is a social enterprise which offers tailoring training for women in order to help them develop skills in making handcrafted products. The enterprise bridges the gap between rural artisans and urban designers, thereby bringing in contemporary styles for all. Recently, we had a designer, Khushbu Rohit, who is pursuing her masters in design from National Institute of Design, India. She shares a few words about her experience so far:

"The purpose of my role here is to analyse the issues the tailors are dealing with and suggest ways to help them correct and learn from their difficulties. My work is also to provide my skills as a designer to these women and come up with appropriate solutions to the problems they face regarding stitching, cutting, finishing etc. I help them to become better in this area and improve their work regularly. I am very happy to be part of this enterprise and having the chance to help in a way that would be useful to them in the long term."

Celebrating International Women's Day

Everyday is women's day in Auroville Village Action Group, where through various activities and programs we embrace womanhood. Therefore, the International Women's Day celebrated worldwide, also holds a lot of significance for AVAG where women are celebrated for being women.

Every year, the celebrations for women's day take new shapes and dimensions and nowadays, the women's clubs themselves organise the celebrations in their own villages, covering more than 75% of the cost. Some also get together with other villages and SHGs to hold cluster level celebrations where they fully cover the cost. In this way, women from different villages and caste groups can participate and get to know each other better and also get the practical experience to plan, prepare budget and execute events.

From the planning stage itself, the women started working. Each women's club had a representative to plan the events, divide the responsibilities and manage the budget to organise these events based on contribution received from each member.



In each village, the women celebrated by playing games like kabaddi, performed traditional folk dances, songs and dramas on social issues. The fun fair is followed by lunch and speeches by the women.

The various celebrations and events on Women's day are aimed at increasing solidarity among women and also to sensitise them on issues they face.

The closing message at the end of the celebrations is a reminder to the women that all of us should be honoured as women regularly and not just one day of the year.



The Debating Program

On March 18th, as a continuation of women's day celebration, AVAG organised a debate competition on the theme of 'Necessary and Unnecessary Expenses'.

The entire day was dedicated to discussions and debates on this topic. Divided into two teams, the women had to explain through speeches their point of view about the common expenses in their daily lives and try to determine if they are necessary or not while finding arguments to support their points.

This was a good way to understand what the priorities of the expenses are and what the consequences of unnecessary expenses in life are.

The goal of this program is to build awareness on lifestyles and spending patterns and foster an understanding on how to be financially prudent and aim at saving their money for more necessary things. The women did a great job at taking a serious topic like finance and discussing it with fun, and laughter and making it entertaining for all participants.



Training and Awareness Programs at Village Action

Security and Safety Awareness

The year 2018 ended with a crowded seminar on the 7th of December with 250 women from 55 villages around Auroville. During this day the inspector of police Mrs.D.Ezhilarasi did a presentation about security, including a new app from the Tamil Nadu police called “Kavalan SOS app”. This app is designed specifically for citizens of Tamil Nadu, to use whenever they feel threatened or in a vulnerable position. This app enables the police to reach them immediately, no matter where they are. It also allows for anonymous complaints, which can be verified instantly.

The app can be downloaded by typing **Kavalan SOS** on Google Play Store.



Medical Camps

One of our key initiatives towards healthcare of women and children is conducting health camps with support from Pondicherry Institute of Medical Science (PIMS). These camps take place twice a week (Mondays and Tuesdays) in two different villages. Free tests are done and medicines are given free of cost and when there is need for further investigation and treatment, it is given at PIMS hospital at zero cost. We also conduct monthly eye-camps with the support of PIMS, particularly to identify cataract and other eye related diseases. Spectacles are given at subsidised price and further surgery is given free of cost.



Meet the Team

The team at AVAG is ever evolving with diverse, dynamic and enthusiastic volunteers joining us from different parts of the world. We recently had the pleasure to welcome two volunteers, Pénélope, a French volunteer and Aaron, a Welwerts volunteer from Germany. Apart from that, we have two other long term volunteers working with us since August 2018- Shrimayee, who hails from Delhi (India) and Konrad, who comes from Germany as well.

The team is also consists of two Aurovillians, Angela and Madhu along with our directors, Anbu and Morris.

Our Social Media Presence

recently redesigned our website: www.villageaction.in
 are now on various social media platforms:
 cebook: @AurovilleVillageActionGroup
 tagram: aurovillevillageactiongroup
 kedIn: Auroville Village Action Group
 itter: @VillageAction
 low us to be updated on all our activities!

How can you help?

Should you be interested in supporting our work you can do so:

- 1) In kind, volunteering for some time for the organisation by contacting Anbu or Angela at avagoffice@auroville.org.in
 - 2) Through financial contributions. Donations will be routed through the Auroville Unity Fund. Please specify the project name as “Auroville Village Action Group” to make sure AVAG receives your contribution.
- Auroville Unity Fund Account Number: 10237876508
 SWIFT CODE: SBININBB474
 Bank: State Bank of India
 Branch name: Auroville International Township Branch
 Code: 03160