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At Auroville, it is always bright

Rajesh B. Nair

When Cyclone Nisha struck, solar-powered streetlights functioned though there was little sunshine

— Photo: T. Singaravelou



TAPPING SUN: Solar photovoltaic panels at Auroville.

PUDUCHERRY: Solar power never fails. That's how one would like to say if one is to go by the fact that when Cyclone Nisha lashed Tamil Nadu and Puducherry recently, solar-powered streetlights at Auroville functioned though there was very little sunshine.

These streetlights, installed a few months ago, were developed at Auroville, around 15 km from here. Importantly, provisions have been made in the lights for protecting the batteries from theft, and the solar panels against vandalism, says Hemant Lamba, trustee, Aurore, which is engaged in the promotion and implementation of renewable energy systems. In fact, Auroville has around 20 per cent of the country's total capacity of standalone solar photovoltaic units. The international township, Auroville, is not a new and sudden convert to renewable energy. More than 30 years ago, it embarked on an ambitious plan to make the entire township dependent on renewable energy. Initially, the decision was to reduce power consumption by implementing energy efficiency devices at homes and institutional establishments. Once this plan clicked, people of the township decided to generate power, using renewable energy systems such as solar photovoltaic, solar water heaters, wind pumps and biomass-based generators. All these efforts led to the establishment of the Auroville Centre of Scientific Research, the research and development unit of the township, and five commercial units engaged in the promotion of renewable energy.

"We have gone a long way in the use of renewable energy sources. By using a combination of systems, the community has been able to reduce consumption and meet around 20 per cent of the total energy requirements. Our present annual consumption of 3.8 million units will be higher if the renewable energy systems are not used," says Mr. Lamba.

There is a plan to install a big windmill either in Coimbatore district or Kanyakumari and a tie-up with the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board to get power through the wheeling system.

The decision to install the wind turbine outside Auroville has been made because of the unsuitability of the wind speed (3.5 metre a second) in the locality for running a big wind generator, he says. With the installation of the system, the entire power requirement could be met through renewable energy. Currently the township has around 150 houses powered by photovoltaic panels and around 50 houses that use solar power along with the state grid connection. Some communities depend upon solar and wind energy.

In meeting its power requirement through renewable energy, Auroville has developed the equipment such as wind pumps, solar pumps, solar UPS, solar water heaters and solar homes. The solar pumps and wind pumps can be replicated in villages where there is power shortage. Their cost depends upon the height of the tower, the diameter of the rotor and the depth of water. At Auroville, there are 25 wind pumps, all of them working at low-wind speed. The solar pumps, numbering 100, are the main source of water for irrigation and drinking.

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