A CASE STUDY OF THE AUROVILLE EXPERIMENT IN INDIA

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AUROVILLE: AN EXPERIMENT IN HUMAN UNITY

International understanding can be seen as a mingling of cultures and promotion of common universal themes like peace, human rights, gender equality and equity. Through history, India has stressed the concept of human unity, of which International understanding is an important facet.

Through this paper, we would like to place before this international audience, a brief description of an on-going experiment in Education for International understanding and human unity in India at Auroville near Pondicherry.

The Spiritual foundation

“All problems of existence,” wrote the great Indian Philosopher-Yogi Sri Aurobindo¹, “are essentially problems of harmony”. Indeed, it could be said that one of the recurring dreams of humanity over millennia has been that of universal harmony and unity.

¹ Sri Aurobindo was born on 15th August 1872 in Calcutta, India. At the age of 7 he was sent to school in England and later he went on to study at Cambridge University. It was only at 20, when he returned to India that he immersed himself in the study of Vedic culture, Sanskrit and Bengali. He was deeply involved in the freedom movement and was arrested on a charge of sedition. While in jail, he read the Bhagwat Gita and the Upanishads. He began meditating and realised that his work far exceeded the liberation

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Over the centuries, attempts have been made to achieve this. Yet all have failed ultimately because they sought to create unity between peoples through uniformity, and harmony through an outer imposition of rules and regulations. For, as Sri Aurobindo makes clear, true human unity is based not upon outer conformity, but upon the realization that “there is a secret Spirit, a Divine Reality in which we are all One”. In the coming age Sri Aurobindo foresaw that this “secret Spirit” would supplant the individual ego as the centre of our lives through the action of a new consciousness which far exceeds our present mental capacities. This consciousness—which he termed the “supramental” consciousness is intrinsically a harmonizing force, for it is an expression of the source of our underlying unity. The supramental consciousness is already active in the world, and will ultimately result in the integral transformation of humanity and of all life on earth.

**Founding “The City of Dawn”**

On 28 February, 1968, Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual collaborator, known as The Mother², founded Auroville—“The City of Dawn”—as an experiment in achieving a genuine human unity, and as a cradle for a new species expressing a new consciousness. On that day, on a windswept plateau in South India, young people from many nations came together and poured earth from their respective countries into a marble urn, symbolizing world unity. The Mother created Auroville to be a place where peoples of different nationalities from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds could live together in a spirit of respect and unity. This is the true purpose of Auroville. To be a place for the realisation of international understanding, peace and human unity in diversity based upon an inner discovery and transformation.

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² **Mirra Alfassa** was born on 21st February 1878 in Paris. In 1914, she came to Pondicherry and met Sri Aurobindo for the first time. The outbreak of the First War caused her to return to France but she came back in April 1920 and was never to leave again. She came to be known as “The Mother” and was the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo. After Sri Aurobindo left his body in 1950, The Mother continued his work and gave shape to his ideals through the vision of Auroville.
The Charter of Auroville outlines 4 basic tenets:

First, Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.

Second, Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and youth that never ages.

Third, Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.

Fourth, Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.

Auroville has a threefold structure, (i) a structure of ecological harmony between nature and human habitations; (ii) a structure of gardens and sanctuaries of peace with Marti Mandir as the centre, a symbolic chamber in which individuals can retire to discover a perennial source of peace; and (iii) an inner structure of life activities which would necessitate the flowering of cooperation, team spirit and sense and practice of fraternity.

Auroville has flourished in many ways, over the years.

The first small group of pioneers has grown into a thriving international community of 1135 people drawn from around 40 nations. Intensive earth restoration and afforestation work has reversed the degradation of the environment in the region. An education system has been established which seeks to stimulate the unique capacities of each individual while, as The Mother put it, “opening the way of the future to the children of the future.” Research in alternative energy applications and appropriate technology have resulted in Auroville becoming a prime demonstration site in India for such technologies. Auroville’s Village Action Group is active in many local villages, improving education,
empowering women, and developing a culture of self-determination and self-respect. Over one hundred Auroville businesses have sprung up in areas as diverse as handicrafts, electronics, printing, garment manufacture and food processing. The community has established an extensive physical infrastructure and an organization based upon largely autonomous work groups. Significant steps have been taken towards economic self-sufficiency. A distinct Aurovilian expression in the Arts is emerging which draws together elements from the new and the old, from the East and the West.

These are real achievements, yet much more needs to be done if Auroville is to be a society founded upon and expressive of the Spirit. In this context, the many outer activities which Aurovilians engage in are not intended to be ends in themselves, but opportunities for making the “inner discovery”, described by The Mother as finding out “what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being, free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who should become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville”.

Auroville welcomes people of goodwill from all nations and cultures. All those who want to live beyond caste, class and religion in a community whose programme is “Research through experience of the Supreme Truth”. Auroville welcomes people committed to human unity.

Auroville unlike conventional townships, seeks to ensure the maximum of individual liberty to progress and experiment while ensuring the integrity and development of the community as a whole. Auroville seeks to do this not through rules and rigidity based on power and precedent but through a superior consciousness.

On the economic side, Auroville aims at an elimination of the use of money within the community while providing for the needs of all members. It also aims at self-sufficiency. Neither of these have been achieved fully. Auroville receives grants from the Indian Government and donors in India and abroad. The township also has over 180 business units being run by the Aurovillians.

**Auroville and Education**
Although the entire gamut of activities, indeed living in Auroville itself, can be considered a form of education, Auroville also has in place what could be called the Aurovillian experiment in education. The aim and scope of education in Auroville is quite different from that of conventional education. "The first principle of education," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "is that nothing can be taught... the second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth." In other words, the true aim of education is defined as the uncovering and stimulating of the unique capacities of each individual. This is not an easy task, and education in Auroville, in its attempts to realise something of this vision, has been through many different phases, ranging from conventional schooling to no schooling. At present there is a system of loose schooling where an attempt is made to develop the individual as a whole, on the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels. Some of the most important experiments involve developing the intuitive faculties of the person. Above all, the education system seeks to achieve the Mother’s dream of a place on earth "where men can live away from national rivalries, social conventions, self-contradictory moralities and contending religions; a place where human beings, freed from all slavery of the past, can devote themselves wholly to the discovery and practice of the divine consciousness..... a place for those..... who seek to live the Truth of tomorrow."

The Aurovillian experiment is dedicated to the promotion of education for all, continuing education and unending progression both of the inner consciousness and of outer manifestation of values of harmony and unity. Everyone in Auroville expected to look upon himself or herself as a teacher and pupil, thus fostering the ideal of a learning society. This education is expected to foster Auroville’s central theme of human unity, not by uniformity, but by free growth of diversity striving towards a living process of solidarity, mutuality, cooperation and unification.

Research in all domains of life, in all branches of knowledge, in all sciences, material and spiritual, in all forms of art and craft and technology is sought to be focussed on the central theme of research in human unity. The organization of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and fields of higher education are all set in the atmosphere of multilingual, multicultural and multidimensional design of living. Right from childhood, each child studies his own mother tongue, but each child also
studies international languages, -- English and French, -- and each child studies Tamil which is the regional language and also Sanskrit which is the ancient and modern pan-language of India.

Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research, which is recognized by the Government of India as an Institute of Higher Learning of All Indian importance provides a wide umbrella to all educational activities in Auroville. These educational activities have been developing innovative methods and contents of education. In its latest formulation, the central Faculty which is being organised has been named Sri Aurovindo World Centre for Human Unity. The Central Faculty focusses on three interconnected themes of research: (a) Evolution; (b) Human Unity; (c) Next Species.

The Central Faculty is envisaged to inspire and coordinate various subordinate faculties, each of which will also be interdisciplinary. These faculties will include the following:

a) Faculty of East, West, and Human Unity;
b) Faculty of Indian Culture and Human Unity;
c) Faculty of Education and Human Unity;
d) Faculty of Arts, Crafts and Technologies;
e) Faculty of Synthesis of Knowledge;
f) Faculty of Futuristic studies in Sociology and Business Management;
g) Faculty of Physical Education and integral Health; and
h) Faculty of Studies in Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Totality of these faculties are to be developed so as to constitute an apex Centre of Research in human unity; and this Centre will be open to researchers in the relevant fields under various categories: researchers from Auroville itself and researchers from the entire world; full time researchers, part-time researchers, visiting researchers and research apprentices. Students in this Centre will belong to a cadre to be called strikingly: No School, which will highlight the methodology of self - education, free from all mechanical processes of schooling and prefixed curriculum, timetables and teacher-dominated classrooms.
"No School" is preceded by what has been called "Super School", where varieties of subjects to be pursued at higher level of thought and action, with an increasing accelerated speed so as to summarise rapidly current accumulated knowledge and experience, and to facilitate students to open up to the gates of frontiers and beyond. The methodology here includes a good deal of schooling and training, but the rigour of development is blended with flexibility and leisurely pace of progression, depending upon each individual's capacity and inclination. To facilitate this difficult blending, students can have facilities of work in Halls of Culture or in Laboratories in different proportions, suitable to each individual's choice, so that leisurely pace is secured in Halls of Culture and rigorous pace is secured through laboratory work. Subjects of study are centred on themes relating to human unity, international understanding and peace and subjects which deal with Applied Philosophy of science of living. A general knowledge course is also provided, so that wide spectrum of studies is encouraged in relation to humanities, natural sciences, fine arts and technologies. In addition, facilities are to be provided for participation in active fields of work, -- from gardening to architecture, from dramatics to community work or commerce and industry. A special care is laid on counselling and inspiring students to gradually master the art of learning to learn and to employ information technology for easy access to the funds of accumulated knowledge all over the world. Again, at every stage of education, a great emphasis is laid on physical education and to the study and practice of the art of excellence and perfection of integral health.

The "Super School" is supported at lower levels by four levels, the lowest of which is called "Last School", which covers the kindergarten level and primary and middle levels including level of Transition to higher levels of secondary education. The Last School is followed by three conceptual levels of education which are called: After School- I; After School-2; and After School-3. These three stages are under experimentation, but conceptually they should correspond to the contents and methods which are relevant to what an individual would like to study in accordance with one's inclination and at one's own pace, --once he or she has attained a good level of linguistic competence and competence of computation and learning through computer. These will include studies in sciences, humanistic studies, languages, fine art, varieties of hobbies, number of crafts and technologies, --all of them well-oriented towards values of the rational, aesthetic, and spiritual pursuits, and all contributing to the development of psychology conducive to international understanding, peace and human unity.
Numerous experiments have been conducted in Auroville and much work is being done to develop the methodology of what has been called "free progress", which is defined as progress pursued voluntarily by each individual under the pressure of the inner need of growth and overarching discovery of inner potentialities and integrating principle of spiritual harmonisation of the body, life and mind. The watchword of this education is "integral education", distinguishable from mere juxtaposition of parallel developments of body, life and mind. Integral education aims at a progressive integration of the body, life and mind by the powers and influence of the inmost integrating principle variously called inmost soul or the guiding principle of harmonisation.

Auroville’s educational experiment is not limited merely to the fashioning of new techniques or methodologies of international education relevant to integral education, but also to the development of new curricula and contents of education as also preparation of teaching-learning materials. A major effort in this direction has resulted in the preparation of two major works: "The Aim of Life" and "The Good Teacher and The Good Pupil". The third major work is ready for the press, and it is entitled "Mystery and Excellence of the Human Body". The fourth major work on which a research team of 50 researchers is working is related to what may be called "Lessons of Human Culture", which underlines the theme of human achievements in the field of illumination, heroism and harmony, --and cast in the mould of the synthesis of East and West, and synthesis of humanities, sciences, fine arts and technology.

Underlying the entire experiment of Auroville is the sentinel work that has been accomplished by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother who have diagnosed the present global crisis as an evolutionary crisis and who have developed a vast fund of knowledge of inner culture of human consciousness by the aid of which human beings can evolve and overcome their limitations to such unending degrees that humanity can effectuate a mutation into a next species possessed of universal consciousness and holistic powers of action that would promote unprecedented processes of harmony and peace.

The Matrimandir

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At the physical and spiritual centre of Auroville is the Matrimandir, described by The Mother as “The soul of Auroville” and as “A place...for trying to find one’s consciousness”. The Matrimandir, which has been under construction since the early 1970s, is now nearing completion. The outer structure, covered in gold disks, contains a plain white inner chamber in which a beam of sunlight is directed down upon a perfect glass sphere. “The play of the sun on the centre,” explained The Mother, “…becomes the symbol---the symbol of the future realisation”. The form of the Matrimandir also represents the emergence of the new consciousness out of matter.

To live in Auroville is to live beyond all that divides humanity, -- race, caste, class, and religion. Deeply committed to the highest reaches of consciousness that are spiritual and divine, the teachings of Sri Aurovindo and Mother which have inspired Auroville, transcend all mould of religion and structures of uniformity. The emphasis is on discovery of living inner most realities that foster sense of oneness and freedom to grow in that oneness.

**Auroville and India**

India is one of the world’s great spiritual civilizations. Therefore it is entirely appropriate that Auroville, as an experiment in hastening the next phase of humanity’s evolution, is situated in the land of the Vedas and Upanishads, the homeland of great spiritual figures in the evolution of consciousness.

Auroville has enjoyed continuous support from the Government of India. In 1988 the Indian Parliament passed an Act establishing the Auroville Foundation, a unique legal entity which safeguards Auroville’s freedom to continue pursuing its high ideals. The Government of India has also encouraged and supported research in areas like education, environmental restoration and human unity.

The Mother had termed India as “the guru of the world.” For it is India which can play a lead role in the new international renaissance towards human unity.
Auroville and the World

“Auroville belongs to nobody in particular, Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole…” runs the first line of the Auroville Charter. This indicates that Auroville’s real work lies not simply in developing a tiny corner of south India: rather, it is to be a work of global significance. It also makes plain that, just as Auroville belongs to the world, so it must welcome the world to participate in this experiment of human unity based upon an evolution in consciousness.

In 1968, Dr. Adisesiah, former Deputy Director-General of UNESCO, responded enthusiastically to the concept of Auroville. “We have tried in UNESCO…we have tried every way and we have failed. And so now we turn to Auroville…On behalf of UNESCO I hail Auroville, its conception and realisation, as a hope for all of us and particularly for our children.”

Since then Auroville has hosted a number of international seminars, and the recently inaugurated Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity is intended to welcome scholars and researchers from all over the world to participate in and contribute to the Auroville experiment. At the same time, Aurovilians have increasingly been going out to share their experience with others. Auroville’s ongoing links with the wider world include contacts with overseas Governments and Non-Governmental Organizations which have funded or supported specific projects. The Auroville International Centres, which are based in a number of countries, provide information and raise funds for Auroville. The International Zone of the city is planned to be the site for pavilions of different nations and cultures. Here, the achievements and characteristics of each culture will be presented in such a way as to illuminate its unique identity. Both the Indian Pavilion-Bharat Nivas-and the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture are in process of being completed, while others are planned.

This overview of Auroville’s unique experiment in human unity and integral education could serve to inspire the vision of the newly established Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding in Korea.