BEYOND THE WALLS OF MIND*

An exploration of pedagogical material in the Auroville context.

...And I tell the teachers that they must teach more and more in accordance with the Truth; for if we have a school here it is in order that it be different from the millions of schools in the world; it is to give the children a chance to distinguish between ordinary life and the divine life, the life of Truth — to see things in a different way. It is useless to want to repeat here the ordinary life. The teacher's mission is to open the eyes of the children to something which they will not find anywhere else.¹

A great deal of words have been expended in the continuing debate on the aim of education in Auroville and the confusion does not appear to have been resolved. Perhaps it is the nature of the mental consciousness to always places things in opposition to each other particularly "spiritual" versus "normal" — which is interpreted as every day and useful — the latter being "necessary" today and the former a consummation for the distant future!

* "Our being looks beyond its walls of mind And it communicates with greater worlds." Savitri Book II Canto II
The problem for the schools is that there is little evaluation of individual pedagogical materials and methods. Their quality and validity are not checked off against the stated aim of education in Auroville. A somewhat amorphous situation exists where you have methods and materials that may be far superior to what is offered in normal educational situations or else they may be much worse.

Generally we claim that the aim of education in Auroville is to allow children to grow without losing contact with their inner beings. But we never acknowledge that this fact implies some very material choices on the part of the teachers — if not the parents and the society — on the upbringing of the child and on the type of education undertaken here. "If the growth of consciousness were considered as the principle goal of life many difficulties would find their solution". Unfortunately, this choice is burdened by the settled impression that in choosing to make the growth of consciousness the main aim of education the mechanical side, focussed on the training of faculties, will be very neglected.

The point is that ordinarily, the education provided in "normal" societies prepares a child to become a contributing functional member. Its aim is Success, Career and, most important, Money. Thus it addresses as a first priority the mechanical side of the training of the physical/mental being and leaves his growth of consciousness in the hands of more or less fortuitous circumstances. Here, we wish to reverse the position — we wish to make the growth of consciousness the main purpose of education and the training of the physical, mental and vital being a means to that end. But, and this is important, it does not at all imply a neglect of the mechanical part of education. If handled right, it should only lead to an amelioration of all those capacities that the best education in the world seeks to awaken. The issue before us is an old one and can be phrased in the words of a teacher addressed to Mother in 1953.

*It has been proposed that education in our school and our university centre would be given in accordance with the ideals of Sri Aurobindo. But so far the education is given as outside; one follows the same programme.*

Yes, my child. And for years I have been fighting for it to be otherwise... It is true that apart from a few rare exceptions, the teaching is given on the most ordinary principles. I know it. But, for instance, in order that it be otherwise, the books which are used should be prepared here, with extracts chosen here, even with the method of teaching worked out here. I have asked several persons to do it. But this is one of those interminable tasks which make you
always put off for the next year the possibility of taking a class which does not follow the grooves of the past. That preparation of the material, for instance, for the true understanding of things, that takes time. One has to face very concrete problems. It is difficult to teach children without their having books to be able to study. But these books, finally, are perforce ordered from the stock available. There is not much choice. One tries to find the best that is available, but the best that is there is not very good. There also, I need people to prepare them, these books.³

It is 1995, and our question is, are we still in the grooves of the past by virtue of the material that we use? Isn’t it about time we addressed the issue of pedagogical material used in Auroville schools? Not only books but also other materials used from kindergarten and primary school level onwards. It is not enough to adopt a practice, or a method, or a material just because it is commonly utilised. If we must find our own identity (as Mother implies) then our choices must be made consciously. It is not just the tools, but the subjects taught that need to be analysed. For instance, if the subject of science is distilled to its essence, it is clear that it must be taught to awaken a rigorous scientific temperament and it is further obvious that it should be experimental rather than theoretical, in the sense that the child should “rediscover” through experimentation the “laws” of the physical world. Similarly, all other subjects activities and tools require our conscious attention. And perhaps we may find that the process of distillation blurs the arbitrary divisions between subjects.

Pedagogical materials

The idea of creating pedagogical material is not so new or so radical. Even in normal societies there is a constant evaluation and change being made in materials used. In fact each society or socio-political system addresses this area as almost a first step in creating a model member who “fits” into its ideological mould. Our century has been an apt example of this fact. Text books repeatedly turned obsolete, as politics and wars re-drew borders of countries and created newer divisions and configurations. The end of colonialism demanded that liberated countries rewrite their history books. An analysis of the two World Wars created their own pressures and perspectives on text books. Communism; socialism; capitalism — do children really grow up free from some sort of indoctrination? And now with the growth of a Global consciousness it is not just history books that need rewriting. We, in Auroville, who sit on a
veritable treasure-house of ideas that are a window on the future, seem strangely dazzled by obsolete "isms" and educational theories.

If you carefully study what Sri Aurobindo has written on every subject a complete knowledge of the things of the world can be easily achieved. What I call studying is to take Sri Aurobindo's books, where he quotes or speaks of one thing or another, then have the corresponding books — when he quotes something, you must take the book it corresponds to; when he speaks of something, you must study the writings on that subject. This is what I call 'studying'. Then after having read the corresponding works you compare them with what Sri Aurobindo has said, and in this way there may be a beginning of understanding. Studying the works of Sri Aurobindo opens the door of the future to us.

Selection of the materials

We live in an utilitarian age. Almost all modern material subtly lauds the ideas of success, career and money as the pinnacles of human achievement. The audio visual media bombards us with this ideology. It is only a very determined effort of will that can keep away the contagion. Thus all material from Kindergarten onwards should be used after some conscious thought. There is a value in agreeing on criteria or measures for selection of material by the team of teachers involved. For instance, creative ways of awakening the imagination and of feeding the sense of wonder should be discussed. The type of tools and activities that externalise or excite the child should be reconsidered. At the same time all that helps to "ground" and concentrate the child in his body should find place in the daily programme. (For kindergarteners the creating and maintenance of a kitchen garden or some other useful necessity of daily living is a good example). Thus the twin purposes of firmly establishing the physical base for those children who tend to "float" and awakening the imaginative capacity of those who are too earth-bound will be served, the whole edifice built with the mortar of a settled peace in the vital.

The best method of suggestion is by personal example, daily converse and books read from day to day. These books should contain for the younger student, lofty examples of the past given, not as moral lessons, but as things of human interest, and for the elder student, the great thoughts of great souls, the passages of literature which set fire to the highest emotions and prompt the highest ideals and aspirations, the records of history and biography which exemplify the living of
those great thoughts, noble emotions and aspiring ideals. This is a kind of good company, *satsanga*, which can seldom fail to have an effect.

A teacher can select material against simple reference points. What is it that uplifts? For younger children the living book of nature — fields, flowers, trees, stones — all can contain "lessons" as much for the dreamer as for the budding scientist. For the older student it may be the eternally living passages from world literature and poetry which represent the highest aspirations of man, and are the well-springs of the great cultures of the world. A Vyasa or a Sophocles or a Shakespeare survive eternally in their capacity to create universal human types and this material can teach by mirroring for a child what is "true" even in his field of experience.

What can awaken an aspiration for progress? Activities that encourage self-less generosity, that increase the capacity for harmonious group work; or stories of struggle and triumph that illustrate what Sri Aurobindo calls the "magnificent soul of man on earth" can inspire a similar effort for progress.

What can call for an end to the animality of man? Only a great awakening and desire for inner growth — signs for which a teacher must remain alert and ready to channel or to harness. Mother speaks of the horrifying Nazi extermination camps as examples of material that can evoke a call towards a future that transcends man. This last example addresses the belief that only what is obviously beautiful is spiritual. A denial of the darker aspects of man can sometimes lead to a tendency in the child of being unable to face his own dark side. One must accept to be part of the darkness to be able to offer it to the light, remarks Mother. One must know how to meet the Divine "in the abyss and on the heights" and see him "in the noble and the vile". The dance of Mahakali is also a face of the Eternal Mother. If a child must grow up whole he has to have the courage to face himself and the right use of teaching materials can aid this. But it is of utmost importance to differentiate between what is historically true and thus an illustration of the depths to which man can sink and fictional writing that is pessimistic or darkly purposeless and which feeds the most tamasic side of the nature, destroying hope in a glorious future or merely titillating the taste for the macabre. A whole genre of stories and films fall into this category. It goes without saying that the teacher must know the reasons for a particular selection in relation to the personalities of the particular children involved — what is good and necessary for one may not be so for the other. A constant adaptation to living circumstances is required. It must only be recognised that those qualities have to be awakened in the child that lead him towards the psychic discovery.
The teacher ought to take all material through the medium of his consciousness and make the subject or theme very much his or her own. When one is inspired and enthusiastic about what one does, when knowledge is fresh, this can communicate itself to the children.

Instead of letting oneself go in the stream of one's nature, of one's mood, one must constantly keep in mind this kind of feeling that one is a representative of the Supreme Truth, the supreme law and one must apply it in the most honest, the most sincere way one can; then one makes great progress oneself and can make others also progress. And besides, one will be respected, there will be no more indiscipline in the class. Therefore when children feel in a teacher, this deep aspiration to act according to the truth, they listen to you with an obedience which you would not get if one day you were in a good mood and the next day you were not, which is disastrous for everybody.

Besides making sure that the material selected WILL awaken aspiration and that it has been illuminated by the teacher's inner enthusiasm it is also important to remember that every book has its own atmosphere and force and as long as one exists in the divided external consciousness one is influenced and affected by the books with which one works. We should not forget the hypnotising power of the written word.

... In a book there is potentially — not expressed, not manifest — the knowledge which is in the person who wrote the book. (Thus, Sri Aurobindo represented a totality of comprehension and knowledge and power; and everyone of his books contains symbolically, potentially, what is in him.) Therefore, if you can concentrate on the book, you can, through the book, go back to the source. And even, by passing through the book, you will be able to receive much more than what is just in the book. For, in books of revelation there is always an accumulation of forces — at least of higher mental forces, and most often of spiritual forces of the highest knowledge. Every book, on account of the words it contains, is like a small accumulator of these forces.

Finally, pedagogical material should be selected on the basis of an understanding of the psychological nature of the growing child. We must recognise that most educational theories of this age are influenced by modern psychology which regards the sub-consciousness as the basis of human personality. Sri Aurobindo speaks of the supernature as the well-spring of human personality. We would do well to note that the two views lead in different directions. We should be wary of accepting theories born
of a certain world view and social milieu quite apart from the attempt that Auroville represents.

Our whole educational philosophy should be built upon the knowledge that the truth of the being lies in the higher realms. One need never accept the dark side of the child as the whole truth of his being. One can insistently call forth the transforming power of the latent but true being.

And when one sees children brought up here beside those who come from outside, there is truly a great difference (perhaps not outwardly in the mechanical part of training, but in the understanding, the intelligence, in the inner awakening), there is a considerable difference, and the new ones need some time to come up to the same level. It is something beyond books, don't you see? It is like the difference between living in a pure atmosphere, filling the lungs with pure air every time one breathes and living in an infected atmosphere and poisoning oneself everytime one breathes. From the point of view of consciousness it is the same phenomenon, and it is essentially the most important thing. And it is this which completely escapes the superficial consciousness. You are plunged in a sea of consciousness full of light, aspiration, true understanding, essential purity, and whether you want it or not it enters. Even for those who are shut up in their outer consciousness, well, they cannot sleep in vain. There is an action here during sleep which is quite considerable, considerable. So that has an effect, it is visible.9

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1 Questions and Answers Vol 4 (page 3) 21.12.50
2 Mother's Answer to a Sadhak Vol 16 (page 428) 18.01.72
3 Questions and Answers Vol 5 (page 416) 30.12.53
4 Mother's Agenda Vol 1 (page 406) 10.08.60
5 Mother's Answer Vol 12 (page 216) 16.11.72
6 Sri Aurobindo Vol 17 A National System of Education
7 Questions and Answers Vol 4 (page 93) 10.02.51
8 Questions and Answers Vol 8 (page 164) 06.06.56
9 Questions and Answers Vol 5 (page 417) 30.12.53