The Mother’s years:

World University for Human Unity

In 1969, when Auroville was applying for B category of affiliation (consultative relationship with UNESCO) two major possibilities surfaced. One involved an important UNESCO project, the Design for Living. The other concerned U Thant’s call for UNESCO, the educational branch of the United Nations of which he was the Secretary-General, to establish a World University directed towards education for the realisation of human unity.

Regarding the Design for Living Kailas commented, “… in spite of their good points and common objectives, Mother, I feel that our fundamental aims, approach and the basis of work are quite different from theirs and I am a bit apprehensive about unnecessary interference from them if Auroville is offered as a part of their project and experiment. And I feel that if any association must take place, it should be the Design for Living which should become a part of Auroville since our aims and objectives are much vaster and far-reaching than theirs, and the request must come from them or from UNESCO rather than us going after them. …. Auroville embodies in its very ideology, conception and town planning the very objectives envisaged in the Design for Living and goes even further than those objectives to fulfill the larger aims.” The Mother replied, “I do not know who told you that—but there is a misunderstanding somewhere because to hand over the management of Auroville to any country or any group however big it may be is an absolute impossibility. If it has been at all taken, it is without my knowledge—because I say to it an emphatic NO.”

As for the university, Kailas wrote, “…the United Nations had asked UNESCO to establish a world university with a view to realise human unity. The latter had sent a circular to all their member-states and affiliated non-governmental organisations with consultative status, asking them to send a project report for this university.” In fact it took long time before Navajata “called a meeting of his committee members for Auroville Roger Anger, Yvonne Artaud, André, Norman Dowsett, Anjani Dayanand, Prem Malik, Shyamsundar and two Aurovillians to discuss the project”. Two weeks before the scheduled deadline, he turned to Kailas with a request to write a project-report based on ideas already approved by the Mother. “When the Mother had it read out, She was furious! She threw the papers on the ground, asking: “Who has asked her to prepare such a report?”” The committee’s lack of preparation was later acknowledged by Prem Malik, who admitted that it had no clue as to what that university should actually look like.

Overcoming a deep crisis, “I had the experience of absolute calm and confidence as Sri Aurobindo came to my help. My hands touched the appropriate book and I opened it on the page required where I found the material needed for my presentation. Ideas came pouring down and a vision was given to me. I worked without a break and extracts were found that perfectly fitted in” explained Kailas regarding the new paper she wrote, entitled “Auroville and Education”, on which the Mother commented, “C’est très, très bien.” (It is very, very good), and wrote, “Kailas, it can be sent. Blessings”.

Kailas also wrote the Mother that “…we cannot accept the U.N. project unless we can have the freedom to work it out on our lines. (The Mother affirmed this sentence by a gesture of nodding,
wrote Kireet\(^1\) in the margin). This being an educational project, the U.N. would undoubtedly consult UNESCO. And most probably Sat\(^2\) will represent UNESCO at the U.N. for this project. Inasmuch as Sat has publicly commended our Centre of Education as the only place where the dream has become a reality and affirmed that its pedagogy, its psychology and its spiritual foundation is that of UNESCO, embodied in its charter and which they are striving after but they have not been able to realise anywhere else, I feel that the opening has already been made for us and this project will be given to us in the interest of the world. (The underlined passage was noted by The Mother).

Since Sat’s remarks are based on our Centre of Education [at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram], we can demand the requisite freedom of action for the Auroville University only on the grounds that it will be an extension of our experimentation in the Centre of Education which has worked independently on the lines of Sri Aurobindo’s teachings without any outside interference. And if they find that our experiment will fulfill the aims that they have in view –as the Deputy Director-General believes it will– they may collaborate in its development. This can be worked out through Sat without any difficulty.” Kireet noted down the Mother’s comments on Kailas’s letter, “It is not exactly like that. It is not an extension. It is a New Creation. The whole of Auroville is education. It is to teach how to live for the New Tomorrow.”

Kireet conveyed to the Mother Kailas’s concern about a letter to U Thant (the Secretary-General of the United Nations) “asking them to accept Auroville University as a World University and to send their committee of experts to draw up with us a plan for Auroville University. ... it seems to be a rather difficult and precarious approach, and may invite unnecessary interference. Besides, our direct action may place us as one among many applicants for the U.N. project. [The Mother asked Kireet to write Her answer as follows: ‘This is horrible. I did not know that Norman was to give the letter. It should be stopped’].”

Instead, Kailas suggested that “UNESCO make this proposal to the U.N. in the interest of the world, which I felt could have given our project its due perspective and importance and at the same time would have left our hands free to work out our own plan”, and she asked Dr. Adiseshiah to present himself to the U.N. the proposal. The Mother commented, “That is better.”

Then Kailas sent her report on Auroville International University to Mr. Jagbans Balbir (the head of the UNESCO Dept. of Education, Paris), along with a letter “in response to the questionnaire sent to us by UNESCO for the feasibility report on the proposal to establish an International University. Though in principle we agree with the underlined aims and objectives to be realised through this university, we feel that the concept and scope of such a university as well as its method of education would have to be radically changed if we are to achieve our aim of human unity, peace and development in a true and effective way.

... ‘a perfected world cannot be created by men who are themselves imperfect.’ For, ‘the conditions under which men live are the result of their consciousness and to change the conditions without changing the consciousness is a vain chimera.’ The basic problem, in our view, is Man himself and the solution of all problems lies within himself. No machinery, however equipped and powerful, therefore, can change Man or solve his problems unless and until he consents to transcend himself

\(^1\) Kireet Joshi was, at the time, the registrar of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram International Centre of Education. He was the previous Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation.[Ed.]

\(^2\) The name by which the Mother and Kailas called Dr. Adiseshiah, Deputy Director-General of UNESCO. [Ed.]
and transform his ego-centric consciousness into a universal consciousness where he is perfected and fulfilled.

Secondly, we feel that a remodeled structure on the old foundations of academic university courses — without any provision of the spiritual education that can help man not only to discover and master himself but to change his very psychology — may not adequately answer to the needs and aspirations of humanity which is constantly impelled to push towards the Future. It seems better therefore to have a completely new institution which takes its experience from the past in the light of the future needs though built on the present available material and spiritual resources.

Thirdly, it seems to us that there must be a living relation between the university and society where all that is learned is not just the theories from books written by others, but something that is pertinent to the experience of the individual in relation to his society, and which is enriched by the experiences of others with the possibilities of their own experimentation. This presupposes the concept of a society that is equally growing with the learning and experience of the individuals who compose it and not a closed society with its fixed codes of laws, conventions and rituals of conduct. In other words, it should be a free world of individual possibilities as well as interdependence and mutuality based on the laws of oneness and on the supreme Truth.

Fourthly, in order to ensure the international character of such a University and to provide the rich material of knowledge and true understanding of the role of each nation for the future of humanity, there should be a free scope for all the nations of the world to blow in the fragrance of their own culture, their own particular genius and unique contribution in the field of ideas and activities. Auroville has proposed a project of permanent cultural pavilions of all nations where each could have its own library, museum or exhibition halls, as well as residential houses for students, teachers and delegates. This project, as you know, has been unanimously accepted by the resolutions of the General Conference of UNESCO and commended for participation by all nations. These pavilions, in our view, could serve as national campuses as well as clearing houses for information and exchanges between the international university and the home universities and research centres.

Besides, this project would ensure an education which would be integral and provide us with the basis for "a new and comprehensive affirmation in thought and in inner and outer experience and as its corollary a new and rich self-fulfillment in an integral human existence for the individual and the race."

Finally, we envisage the possibility of this university having its own satellite communication system which can serve its purpose ideally if it finds an environment which is free from all politics and narrow self-interests, above all prejudices of race, nationalities, ideologies, religions, creeds and all that is contrary to the spirit of the Truth. This may also offer participation by all with all, for all, at the highest level."

This was followed by "Answers to the Questionnaire on the World University for Human Unity".

On April 20, 1970 Mr. Balbir replied to Kailas’ letter and report, writing, "... I appreciate the reflections that have gone into the preparation of these papers and the presentation inspired by great ideals of philosophy and education. These papers are all the more welcome at a time when the United Nations and UNESCO are concerned with the implementation of the terms of the Resolution..."
The overall emphasis on the orientation of the human mind to the exigencies of contemporary society both in the developed and developing countries is a valuable point. Auroville, as you point out, can indeed work to be a centre for the study and appreciation of ‘the cultures of the different regions of the world’ and by a select program of intellectual activity, help individuals to become conscious of the wealth of the nation to which they belong and to surpass the natural frontiers in order to converge towards internationalisation of spirit....

The chapter on the Auroville University appears to me to contain many elements that could be useful for elaborating the concept of the United Nations University. The notes on the Integral Yoga and on Education have also retained our attention and would provide for a basis of a comparative reflection on the philosophy of education, if required.

Please accept my warm thanks for providing us with all this material and be assured of our continued interest in your activities.”

As the Centenary of Sri Aurobindo was approaching, the Government of India put forward a resolution for UNESCO's General Conference, to be held in the fall of 1970. Kailas attended the conference and, thanks to one of her acquaintances who worked for a television channel, she arranged for an interview on Auroville with Dr. Adiseshiah.

On November, 1971 Kailas replied to a letter from Mr. Pouschpa Dass, in India the Director of the Division of Cultural Development at UNESCO, thanking him for his warm response regarding the Auroville International University. She enclosed a copy of her letter to Mr. Kirpal, President of the Indian National Commission for UNESCO, asking him “to consider a possibility of laying a foundation stone for the pavilions through the International Council for the Future of Cultural Relations, as well as through UNESCO. If this could be done on the 15th August, 1972, it will serve a dual purpose: the celebration of the Centenary of Sri Aurobindo and the 25th Anniversary of India’s Independence.” She also enclosed a general letter regarding Auroville and UNESCO’s participation, hoping that he would initiate some action through UNESCO.

She also wrote to the Mother, “...I had a discussion with Sat concerning the Government of India’s offer of Rs. 5 crores for a Sri Aurobindo University. It seems we could accept this offer for a university in Auroville. He asked me to discuss the various problems and possibilities in connection with it with Karan Singh and Kothari. Sat will support it ...” The Mother’s answer: ‘You can speak to Counouma or André.’ Well, neither of them saw the possibility or the necessity of another Sri Aurobindo University in Pondicherry.”

Despite the lack of initial interest in the university, later on, the Committee members agreed that it was urgent and that money should be provided for Kailas to go to Delhi to discuss the Cultural Pavilions project with Mr. Kirpal; Dr. Adiseshia would also be present and help with the presentation. Due to a divergent position taken by one Committee member, however, Kailas dropped the initiative.

A digression is necessary in order to introduce in proper historical context – the crucial years that followed the 1968 students’ revolt in the affluent countries – the theme of all-life education, propounded by avant-garde elite appointed by UNESCO to do research on a new cultural paradigm. “The late 1960s were years of striking contrasts: after the destructions and losses caused by the Second World War, the industrial countries had made a surprisingly fast recovery. Social change had accompanied economic growth with an ensuing rise in standards of living. Newly independent countries were attempting their economic take-off and the notion of the contribution of education to
development was accepted. In developing and industrialized countries alike, enrolment figures were reaching levels never seen before. Yet, the organization of education systems, their methods and their contents remained substantially the same and the goals of education had not been redefined to match the challenges of the emerging new world. This led to unrest among students, generally referred to as the 1968 education crisis which started in the United States and France, but soon spread to a large number of countries. In 1970, René Maheu, then Director-General of UNESCO, thought that the time was ripe to set up an International Commission on the Development of Education which was to submit its report in 1972. The Commission, chaired by Edgar Faure, former Prime Minister and Minister of Education of France at the time of the 1968 crisis, was composed of six eminent members selected in their personal capacity as high-level educators or scientists, former ministers or international civil servants.

The outcome of the Commission’s studies was ‘Learning to Be’, which refers to the role education ought to play in developing the complete person in all its dimensions. This UNESCO publication is also known as the 1972 Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on the Development of Education, which Edgar Faure chaired in 1971-72. The Commission’s task was to ponder upon overall solutions to the major challenges confronting educationists in a fast changing world. “These ideas, well received by educators, were widely discussed. Their application, however, seems to have been partial and fragmentary. Moreover, it is possible that the future role assigned to education by this Commission might have been considered too ambitious, and that it expected too much of education. Nevertheless, the ideas of lifelong education and of a learning society seem to have remained entirely valid, and can serve as a grid for analysis as well as principles for action. The report remains one of the most complete and boldest attempts to derive the educational implications of societal change and of the impact on society of the on-going scientific revolution.” Translated into thirty-three languages, ‘Learning to Be’ has had a major impact on education policies around the world and, in the third millennium, is still being reprinted.

Such was the chessboard on which Kailas, the Mother’s finely attuned instrument, was called to play. She reported, “Dr. Faure was invited by UNESCO’s International Commission on Education to prepare a report for the project of the U.N. on World University. This was published in a book, entitled ‘Learning to Be’. It was sent to us and came to my attention”. She was then stimulated to write the following to Dr. Adiseshiah:

“I thought of preparing a commentary on the report with a view to initiate a basis of collaboration between UNESCO and Auroville International University, especially since Dr. Faure himself expressed in his letter to me the concord between the two. However, I believe that the concept of Auroville, its thesis and programme are better defined and go beyond the vision of this report. In my view, ‘a critical reflection and overall solution to the problems involved in the development of education in this changing universe’ offered here fall short of my expectations.”

3 René Maheu (1905–1975), a close friend of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, was a French professor of philosophy and the sixth Director-General of UNESCO, 1962–1974, for two successive mandates. [Comp.]
4 In his youth a radical and a Maquis partisan during the French Resistance to the Nazis, Edgar Faure (1908-88) was a politician, essayist, historian, and memoirist. He was twice the Prime Minister of France during the fifties; in this capacity he was one of the “big four” of the Geneva Conference (with Eisenhower, Bulganin and Eden). He was also Minister of Finance, Foreign Minister, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Education, Minister of Social Affairs, and President of the National Assembly. Appointed Minister of Education after the student rebellion in May–June 1968, in 1972 Faure was appointed Minister of Social Affairs. [Comp.]
5 www.unesco.org/education/educprog/50v/brochure/maintrus/35.htm
6 Ibid.
Questioning humanity’s destiny, Kailas continued, “...our understanding of the true nature of these problems and difficulties as much as the solutions offered will, I believe, depend upon our understanding of the destiny of mankind. It is only in the light of this vision that the problems become clearly defined and the precise and effective solutions can be found.”

She concluded, “I have attempted the study of the basic issues in my compilation on ‘Auroville and Education’ while offering Sri Aurobindo’s analysis of the crisis of our age, the proposed solutions, the reason of their failures and the unique role of Auroville.”

To Dr. Adiseshiah, who noted that her analysis was “in accordance with Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy on education,” while he presented a more orthodox approach, Kailas replied, “Sri Aurobindo’s views on education as presented by me are at times my own complex deductions on the basis of his exposition of the constitution and psychology of Man and his analysis of the universal forces at work for the individual and collective perfection. Needless to say, I am in perfect agreement with you. I believe it is a question of emphasis on our different view points, not of dichotomy.

I do understand that a rationalist mind is too arrogant and self-confident to accept my proposition that spiritual education is an inevitable necessity for the full development of man’s total personality ... However, I do firmly believe that if we are to achieve our goal of total peace, development and progress, it is necessary to include spiritual education in our curriculum. ...

While planning for education it is all too often forgotten that for ‘learning to be,’ man must dive down deep below and soar higher than the mental, vital and physical surface of individual and universal Nature and know the powers that control him and the world. This alone can help him to come out of his present imperfection and impotence.

The distinction of the elite therefore on the basis of economic and intellectual attainment does not seem to be of much value if this spiritual consciousness is missing. Hence again, the primary emphasis on spiritual –as distinct from moral education– so as to preserve our ‘dying race’ and re-create, rather new-create it.”

Kailas concluded by asking for his help “in the preparation and the realisation of the prospective plan for this University-to-be so as to finally integrate the possibilities of international research and development on both the material and spiritual planes for an actual embodiment or a living expression of human unity, peace and progress for the whole of humanity”. She supported her case by observing that “the Madras Institute for Development Studies is interested in an action-oriented project and Auroville seems to be the most realistic project with its proposal for an international university and permanent cultural pavilions of all nations fulfilling your objectives of lifelong education, development, employment opportunities, eradication of poverty in Tamil Nadu and India and a better life for all.”