Auroville - progress towards a learning society

University

Right from the start, the concept of Auroville as a 'university' fired the imagination of many, as a place which is planned as an open and dynamic centre of learning and teaching; as a place where, ideally, all residents are students as well as teachers; and as a place where the basic economy will be an exchange of knowledge, an economy of teaching and learning. These have been persistently alive images in the collective consciousness of Auroville since the start.

Many initiatives have been born from this pre-occupation over the years, in particular the Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research (SAIIER) in 1984, which was created to continue and broaden the work that was already under way in developing the educational capacity of Auroville and to support advances in educational and cultural research. Then there has been the establishment of many team-based research centres in all the areas of life that Auroville is engaged with, including education, health, technology, arts and crafts, village development, agriculture and forestry, architecture and spiritual development. These centres offer, from various locations in Auroville, educational programmes to residents of Auroville and, increasingly, to the local Tamil population and visitors.

Education and research facilities

Education and research are very evidently themes that are of predominant concern for Auroville, and naturally so, as it is part of the curriculum given to the community by The Mother through the Auroville Charter.

Today, Auroville is preparing to take yet another step towards orienting itself more deliberately around these ideals. Planning has commenced to expand the work of SAIIER through the creation of two new major initiatives. The first is the establishment of eight Faculties, which will occur as a natural development of existing programmes and activities of SAIIER. The faculties are:

1. Faculty of East, West, and Human Unity
2. Faculty of Indian Culture and Human Unity
3. Faculty of Education for Human Unity
4. Faculty of Arts, Crafts and Technologies
5. Faculty of Physical Education and Perfection of the Body
6. Faculty of studies in Sri Aurobindo and The Mother
7. Faculty of Humanity, Nature and Environment.
Learning opportunities

The formation of these faculties has emerged in part as a result of a research in Auroville itself about the existing opportunities for learning across all areas of life, and the potentialities of educators and researchers to expand their work if the means were available to do so. It was found that there exists in Auroville a vast range of activity areas, which can essentially be reflected in these eight thematic areas. There are individuals and teams who are willing to offer programmes, activities and apprenticeship-learning opportunities for youth and adults in Auroville and throughout the world. Work is currently under way to draw together those working in each theme or Faculty. One needs to know their requirements in order to enable them to expand their work to more fully embrace this idea of a learning society.

Research into human unity

The other initiative is known as the Centre for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU). Its main areas of focus will include the study of human transformation and the exploration of conditions that are favourable for an evolution in consciousness and the realisation of a fundamental human unity. CIRHU wishes to be a kind of think tank and exchange-point for people around the world who are concerned with these themes - to experiment, discuss, exchange and contribute to the growing global understanding of what it means to create and live in a truly spiritualised society.

CIRHU will also be interdisciplinary in the sense that its areas of enquiry will be nurtured by whatever streams of knowledge will flow from research institutions in India and abroad as well as from the faculties of SAIIER.

This proposal for the expansion of SAIIER as described above is a new ambitious venture which Auroville is preparing itself to undertake. Essentially it will be a vehicle to accelerate, and bring to predominance, the relevant points in our Charter in a collectively cohesive way. It will develop organically and in synergy with all that already exists in Auroville - the schools, the research centres, and especially the rich human resource material - and nourish it.

Expansion

In order to adequately embrace these directions, Auroville will need to expand its present base of facilities and resources so as to be able to host, conduct research and offer programmes to a larger number of student learners from within and outside Auroville. A process has started to formulate a detailed development proposal to seek assistance from the Government of India to implement these initiatives. If successful in being able to attract the support it requires, Auroville - through SAIIER - would plan the following programmes from the year 2002 onwards:

- Host leading scholars and thinkers throughout the world for conferences on themes of consciousness and research in human evolution.
- Offer teacher training programmes in value oriented education.
- Provide opportunities for student exchanges from around the world to foster international understanding.
- Offer training programmes on themes including earth restoration and sustainable living (in addition to the programmes already available to date).
The concept of CIRHU

- by Alain Bernard

A Rs 129 crore (US$ 28 million) proposal to give a new impetus to research and experimentation in the development of Auroville has been submitted to the Government of India.

In January 2000, Aurovilians received from Dr. Kireet Joshi, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, a thick document entitled CIRHU, a concept paper. CIRHU is the acronym for Centre for International Research for Human Unity. Kireet envisaged the future city being progressively organized around education and research, and this would give to CIRHU the world-wide dimension that it is meant to embody. Kireet formulated the concept of CIRHU as resting upon four needs:

1. the need to deepen, widen and heighten the higher levels of educational research
2. the need to harness expertise, scholarship and professional experience, which are already available in Auroville, and also to invite help from relevant institutions in the country and in the world as well as from visiting scholars and teachers
3. the need to give a more concrete shape to understanding the concept of human unity that underlies the Charter of Auroville
4. the need to provide a suitable environment and programme of higher education to the students of the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research.
Kireet's proposed organization for CIRHU comprises a central faculty and seven other faculties:

The central faculty would be interdisciplinary, would receive from other faculties the results of their specific themes of research, and promote them by a process of interchange and enrichment. This faculty would have five major themes of research: Evolution, Synthesis of Knowledge, Synthesis of Culture, Human Unity and Next Species.

The seven other faculties would concentrate upon different aspects that are relevant to the theme of human unity in the context of evolutionary progression:

- Indian Culture and Human Unity;
- East, West and Human Unity;
- Education for Human Unity;
- Arts, Crafts and Technologies;
- Studies in Sri Aurobindo and The Mother;
- Perfection of the Human body,
- Humanity, Nature and Development.

The first five year phase of CIRHU would include establishing a resource center with a library of 50,000 reference books for research purposes - an indispensable tool if Auroville wants to be able to attract and retain high level researchers - and the development of students/scholars/teachers exchange programmes.

Kireet's original idea was to have all the faculties under CIRHU. However, there soon came the perception that CIRHU should retain its character as a specialized high level research center. The seven faculties were thus "separated" from CIRHU and put directly under SAIIER - the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research - the umbrella organization for almost all the educational activities of Auroville which receives grants from the Government of India for promoting the development of systems of non-formal education in India.

From April 2002 the 10th Five-year Plan of India will begin. In order to obtain a large increase in annual grants for education in Auroville, SAIIER has formulated a development proposal which includes a substantial funding request for CIRHU. The proposal has taken thirteen months to elaborate, and has involved cooperation between a large group of Aurovilians involved in very diverse activities, including not only education and artistic activities, but also environment, agriculture, water, health, martial arts and physical education, architecture and planning, information technology, communications and multimedia, studies on Mother and Sri Aurobindo, the Unity Pavilion in the International Zone, Indian and Tamil cultures, village action and the reception of visitors - it would probably be quicker to mention what is not included in this development plan!

The proposal is an attempt to give a new impetus to research and experimentation in the development of Auroville. This explains the size of the financial support which is requested from the Government of India: 129 crore rupees (about US$ 28 million). Auroville must make swifter progress towards its integral realization. The moment of acceleration has come.
SAIER development program progress report

The same is true for the Centre of International Research for Human Unity (CIRHU).

Construction 2003 – 2004

A total of Rs 1,34,87,000.00 has been requested for construction projects in the year 2003 – 2004. So far a total of 86 lakhs has been sanctioned and is being spent on the following projects:

Hostel for visiting youth/students and trainees – the first construction project commenced in July 2003 and is due for completion by the end of March 2004. This hostel will have a capacity for accommodating up to 47 youth and trainees. It is located near the newly built Centre for Urban Research and the planned Multi-Media centre, thus helping to consolidate a new node of development in Auroville in the Administrative Zone. Kolam undertook design and construction by Auronirmata.

Information centre: Video and exhibition hall for visitors to Auroville will form part of the visitors centre complex within the faculty of east, west and human unity. Construction has recently commenced and is due to be completed by the end of March 2004. Auroville Building Centre (ABC) is undertaking construction.

New Kindergarten (formerly Deepanam): 3 classrooms located in Centre field near the existing kindergarten. Construction has recently commenced and is due to be completed by the end of March 2004. Poonam is architect and ABC is undertaking construction.

Transition staff quarters: Accommodation for teachers and researchers will be located on the Transition school campus. Construction has recently commenced and is due to be completed by the end of March 2004. Piero and Gloria undertook design and Sumark is undertaking construction.

Ilaignarkal: Classrooms, workshop and library is being constructed at Ilaignarkal. Construction has recently commenced and is due to be completed by the end of March 2004. Auronirmata is undertaking construction.
Equipment:
In order to furnish the buildings that will be constructed under the grant and also to provide some equipment for projects undertaking research programs, a budget line for equipment exists. For the first year of the grant, a total of Rs 21,50,000 was spent on equipment for all faculties and CIRHU between April and June. This year a total of 61 lakh has been requested under the approved SFC Memorandum to be shared by all SAIIER programs and a process is underway for allocating these funds.

Research program:
For this 2nd year of the grant, a total of 19 lakh has been requested for research programs. These funds have already been allocated to 14 new projects within the faculty of education for human unity, 7 projects of “other faculties” and 6 CIRHU projects. Projects have been selected on the basis of an independent evaluation of the detailed applications. Projects eligible to be considered to received funds are those that address in some way the following themes: education for international understanding and human unity, education for the development of integral personality and value oriented education. More details of research programs are available with SAIIER administration. Last year a total of 3 lakh was spent on supporting existing educational research programs. A call for applications for research programs for next year (starting April 1st 2004) will be issued at the end of his year.