

# Auroville Today

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Some Aurovilians have described Auroville Today as being relentlessly upbeat in its coverage of the community. And they don't necessarily mean this as a compliment.

However, while it is true that we enjoy celebrating interesting individuals and successful projects, we have not shied away from criticising shortcomings in our community functioning when we felt it was necessary. Such shortcomings can be the result of poor communication or lack of resources. But when we dig deeper, very often we find that the core of the problem is the inability of people who share a certain work or responsibility to work harmoniously together.

Nobody pretended that an "actual human unity" would be easy to achieve, particularly when the Auroville laboratory is made up of such an assortment of individuals and cultures. That's why, in this Auroville birthday issue, we try to shed some light on why unity is so important and how the difficulties can be surmounted, while celebrating (yes, we can't break the habit) one of the more successful examples of people working together in pursuit of a common vision.



The Mother giving balcony darshan

PHOTO COURTESY SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM ARCHIVES

## An Entanglement of Chaotic Unity

The Global Age and the Auroville Experiment.

By Richard Hartz

We have stumbled into the global age, but have yet to develop a global consciousness. Outer change has raced ahead of inner change. As the expansion of modernity collides with the finiteness of the earth, we struggle to reconcile progress with sustainability. Meanwhile the Westernization that went with modernization confronts the resurgence of civilizations that insist on preserving their own distinctive spirit. Though this complicates the problem, the dialogue of cultures could also help us to solve it by pooling our diverse resources in a coordinated effort.

Despite the differences between East and West, leading thinkers in both parts of the world arrived early in the twentieth century at similar diagnoses of the human condition. In Europe, for example, Henri Bergson noted that in humanity's "excessively enlarged body, the spirit remains what it was, too small now to fill it, too feeble to direct it." Reflecting on the machinery under whose weight modern life "groans half-crushed", he concluded that "the mechanism demands a mysticism."<sup>1</sup> In India, Sri Aurobindo saw that man "has created a system of civilisation which has become too big for his limited mental capacity and understanding and his still more limited spiritual and moral capacity to utilise and manage, a too dangerous servant of his blundering ego and its appetites." Yet he was cautiously optimistic in his view that "the feeling that there is no other solution than the spiritual cannot but grow and become more imperative under the urgency of critical circumstance."<sup>2</sup>

We live in a time when, as Sri Aurobindo observed almost a hundred years ago, "men and nations are drawn close together and partially united though in an inextricable, confused entanglement of chaotic unity."<sup>3</sup> The process creating this entanglement is now called globalization. The word dates from the 1960s, but the drawing together of the human race has been going on for

millennia. For better or worse, it began to accelerate with the joining of the hemispheres at the time of Columbus. By the late nineteenth century this process had entered the phase commonly recognized as globalization, implying a heightened interconnectedness and mutual impact on a worldwide scale, not only economic, but political, social and cultural.

Globalization in this sense has been a manifestation of the expansive dynamics of the modern age. Since the late twentieth century, the dynamics of modernity have shown signs of breaking down. But the consequences of globalization remain and are intensified, justifying the description of our times as the global age.<sup>4</sup> On the most material level, as we become aware of the limited resources of the earth and the vulnerability of the Gaia system, the core value of expansion is replaced by that of sustainability. Progress itself, so central to modernity, is called into question. But perhaps what is needed is a more integral concept of progress.

This is the potential contribution of Auroville, which was initiated by the Mother as "a collective experiment for the progress of humanity."<sup>5</sup> A unique long-term field experiment with participants from all over the world, Auroville was set up to explore the possibility of unity in diversity under the conditions of the global age. Its design takes into account all the elements of the complex problem we face today: ecological, economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual. Situated on wasteland reclaimed through extensive afforestation, the experiment's ecological component is most conspicuous in the Green Belt. The industrial, international, residential and cultural zones of the proposed town, first indicated in a sketch made by the Mother as early as 1965 and still gradually taking shape, show a conscious recognition of the economic, political, social and cultural aspects of the world problem. And since the hypothesis being tested in Auroville is that a

viable human unity requires a spiritual foundation, this dimension is visibly symbolized by the Matrimandir with the silence of its luminous meditation chamber at the heart of it all.

The Mother insisted "on the fact that it will be an experiment, it is for making experiments – experiments, research, study."<sup>6</sup> The experimental nature of Auroville has to be kept in mind if the vicissitudes the project has passed through are to be seen in the right perspective. Experimental science proceeds through a combination of "successful" and "unsuccessful" experiments. Both are considered to be of equal value for the discovery of truth. An experiment is a failure only if nothing useful is learned from it, whether because of poor design, careless execution or shoddy documentation. From this point of view, whatever the apparent successes or failures of the Auroville experiment so far, its inspired conception and the undiminished commitment, passion and integrity of the participants more than forty years after its inauguration ensure that it will continue to be worth observing.

It was to be expected that such an attempt at a dynamic spirituality grappling collectively with the complexities of contemporary life would confront inner and outer difficulties commensurate with the scope of its objective. Sri Aurobindo, at least, would not have been surprised. Anticipating the evolutionary need for such communities, he also foresaw the kinds of problems they were likely to face. "It might be," he wrote, "that, in such a concentration of effort, all the difficulties of the change would present themselves with a concentrated force; for each seeker, carrying in himself the possibilities but also the imperfections of a world that has to be transformed, would bring in not only his capacities but his difficulties and the oppositions of the old nature and, mixed together in the restricted circle of a small and close common life, these might assume a considerably enhanced force of

obstruction which would tend to counterbalance the enhanced power and concentration of the forces making for the evolution."<sup>7</sup>

Sri Aurobindo was speaking from experience. He had encountered this disconcerting phenomenon even before an Ashram grew up around him. In a diary entry in 1913, when as yet only a few young men were staying with him, he observed: "The atmosphere of the house is full of the struggle and the opposition to the dharma of the satyayuga of which the assistants of the satyayuga are the chief instruments owing to their clinging to their egoism and small selfishnesses."<sup>8</sup> Later, when the Ashram had been established as a "laboratory" for his Yoga, Sri Aurobindo described it as "an epitome of the human nature that has to be changed" and commented: "Wherever humans are obliged to associate closely, what I saw described the other day as 'the astonishing meannesses and caddishnesses inherent in human nature' come quickly out... But when one tries to do Yoga, one cannot fail to see that in oneself and not only, as most people do, see it in others, and once seen, then? Is it to be got rid of or to be kept? Most people here seem to want to keep it. Or they say it is too strong for them, they can't help it!"<sup>9</sup>

Auroville's aspiration for human unity was not likely to exempt it from similar contradictions. From the beginning, even with the best will, the members of the community struggled to live up to its ideals. One of them asked the Mother: "It seems very difficult to be able to want to achieve any specific aim and at the same time to love everyone. When we begin to want something and try to act with a particular result in mind, immediately we cut ourselves off from everyone who does not agree with that. In practice, how can we do both at the same time?" The Mother seemed momentarily puzzled: "You cut yourself off from people who do not think as you do?... But not a single person thinks as you do!..."

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