

Expanding Auroville's educational options

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"We expect that the students who will appear for 10th examinations this year (2009-10) will do even better, because they have been better prepared in the CBSE methods from the 7th standard onwards. Moreover, in line with the NCF recommended reforms, the CBSE has now eliminated the 10th standard examination from 2011 onwards for students who stay in the same school until the 12th standard. This means that our students can have a continuous learning experience from 6th-12th, without public examinations.

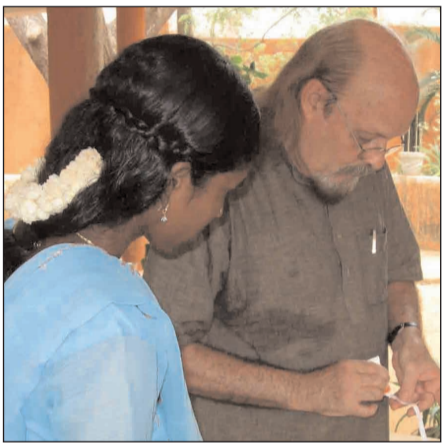
"Today, after three years in the CBSE programme, we see that the students have made considerable improvements in terms of language usage, creativity, quickness of response, conceptual development and engagement in learning. There has been a very measurable success, and the standards of education have been raised by many levels.

"Aikiyam is now preparing students well up to 8th standard; then they can move to New Era Secondary School for their 9th to 12th standards. NESS has also the possibility to enrol students from other schools, such as from Udavi in Edaiyanchavadi. Udavi has an integral education programme, although it follows the Tamil Nadu Matriculation Board system for the 8th and 10th standard. We have already taken in Udavi students and found them to be equal to or better than students from other schools. We have also enrolled promising students from the Kulilapalayam Trust School and even from Pondicherry. Most children we teach come from families that are closely associated to Auroville. Many of them are prospective Aurovilians, and like so many previous students of After School, will eventually have a lot to contribute to the community.

"So, as of today, there are three options for students of Auroville's outreach schools. One is the Tamil Nadu State Board examinations. The Kulilapalayam Trust School, which has about 1000 students, targets this system. They teach in both English and Tamil and have geared their programme for the population from the surrounding villages, who in general do not have a high level of English proficiency. Udavi follows the Tamil Nadu Matriculation system although they have a strong English medium preparation. And then there are the two CBSE schools.

CBSE for Auroville schools?

"The question has been raised if the CBSE system should also be introduced in the Auroville schools. There are a few problems here. One is that Auroville's primary schools (Transition and Deepanam) don't have a curriculum that follows a 1st to 8th grade sequence.



Rod Hemsell with a NESS student

Teachers are free to do what they like with their groups and often bring in materials from different countries. This can lead to duplication of effort at different levels and gaps in the education sequence. If you compare the CBSE syllabus to what is now being used at Auroville's primary schools, you'll find that the CBSE syllabus is superior with

respect to scope and sequence.

"A second problem is that all Auroville schools work with volunteer teachers, who for the most part do not have any formal training or certification, either in their subject areas or in the field of education. Under the CBSE, we must employ formally qualified teachers. All of the teachers at New Era Secondary School have degrees in their field and in education, and many have Masters' degrees.

"That leads to the third problem. The CBSE schools have to pay competitive salaries starting at around Rs 8,000 a month with regular raises. The teachers at the Auroville schools receive an Auroville maintenance of about Rs 6,000.

"For these reasons, adopting a CBSE affiliation for Auroville schools is not easy. I recommend instead that the primary schools consider adopting the CBSE syllabi without formally affiliating themselves to the CBSE. Then they would cover that area of deficiency which is now a handicap for both teachers and students; and they would have a systematic content in line with the ideals of Auroville while still being able to use their creativity and additional resources to supplement the syllabus.

"I am speaking here about content, not about methodology. However, it is likely that I would find myself in disagreement with those in Auroville who believe that methodology, such as 'free progress', 'integral education' or 'activity-based learning' is always more important than content. Learning about 20th century changes in human geography and the human development index, for example, is important in the content of any methodology. Methodology and content are equally important.

"If there is a common or comparable preparation, the students who leave



Morning assembly at NESS

any of the primary schools can then decide where they want to study next. I expect that Tamil families of Auroville, who so far have sent their children to Pondicherry schools or to Kulilapalayam Trust School, would then send them to NESS. Other students may opt to study at Future School for the English 'O' and 'A' levels, which are comparable to the CBSE 10th and 12th standards; or they may decide to join Last School which doesn't specifically educate to pass exams.

Vision for the future

"The CBSE programme may help in bringing new people, like Indian professionals who are familiar with the CBSE standard of education, to Auroville. Our immediate steps are to pursue Government of India funding to build a science lab, because we cannot teach science and qualify for the CBSE science track without it. Right now, we are only entitled to teach the humanities.

"This brings me to a vision of the future. Pondicherry has only two other CBSE schools, one nearby JIP-

MER, the other next to PIMS in Kalapet. It is conceivable that the Auroville CBSE schools would host outside students along with those from the local population and from Auroville. It is also conceivable that, in the longer term, a residential facility could be provided if an adequate campus could be developed. That would enable families outside Auroville to send their children here for education, because we would have a well-developed campus in an international setting.

"We recently submitted to the Auroville Foundation and to L'Avenir d'Auroville a plan for the development of the present Last School campus into a future CBSE campus - once Last School has moved to the centre of Auroville. Both were supportive of the idea. Such a development would guarantee a high standard of education for Auroville's students, students coming from the surrounding villages, and possibly students coming from outside. It might also provide income for Auroville. But this is still a possibility for the future."

In conversation with Carel

"Now, I want you to tell me what life is like in a Tamil village. Tell me the kinds of things you do. In English, remember."

Hands shoot up. "We use our hands when we eat." "Ladies put flowers in their hair." "Men wear lungis, women saris." "We don't use a proper toilet".

"Ah," Shankar pauses. "You remember we talked about Harappa and those other cities from thousands of years ago that are now being excavated?" "Yes." "Imagine that your villages are covered with a huge layer of dust, and many years in the future people excavate them. What conclusions will they draw about how you lived? Well, one thing they will say is that they were an uncivilized people because they didn't have toilets."

The class goes silent. Suddenly a girl puts up her hand.

"Another thing that happens in the villages is that girls get up earlier than the boys."

"Yes," Shankar walks behind two of the boys and puts his arms round their shoulders. "So why do the girls have to get up earlier? Perhaps because our little maharajas here need their morning tea?" Everybody laughs.

"Now," Shankar puts his hands together and glances round the room. "Suppose that somebody comes to your villages from a place far away. He asks about your customs and you tell him, 'Oh, when somebody dies we play music and let off fire crackers.' He will say, 'How can you do this? You should be quiet, dignified. All this has to be changed.' What will you say to him?"

For a moment, silence. Then a small girl in the front row speaks up. "We won't let him change us." "But," says Shankar, "suppose I'm that man and I have lots of money. You know how things are done in the village. I'll go to the headman and offer him some land. I'll get him on my side."

"Then we'll call the police," says another student. "No problem," says Shankar.

The class goes quiet. "You see," says Shankar, "It's not so easy to oppose the powerful. But there have been examples."

He walks to a map of India hanging in front of the classroom and sweeps his hand across Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. "This area was known as Chhotanagpur and 150 years ago a man did stand up to the most powerful people at that time, who

Learning to think

Shankar is the Principal of Aikiyam School, an outreach day-school for 200 children from the nearby villages. Here Shankar takes a class of 8th graders



Shankar with a class at Aikiyam School

happened to be the British. His name was Birs Munda. He was also standing up to the local landlords who were cheating the tribals out of their lands. Now, what is a tribal?"

"Someone who lives by a river?"

Shankar laughs. "You're thinking that 'tribal' sounds like 'tributary' so the two must be connected. But no."

"Are they people from the Colony?" [*The Colony is a part of some villages where members of the scheduled castes, formerly known as 'Untouchables', live separately. eds.*]

"No. The tribals have quite different customs from you..."

"Like the gypsies?"

"Yes. But the people from the Colony live just like you. So why do you think they are different?"

Shankar walks around the room. "Now suppose that I'm a powerful man, I can arrange all kinds of things and I find a girl from the Colony for Muni here to marry. What will Muni's father say? What will you say, Muni? Will you marry her?"

Muni shakes his head.

"No? Why not? I promise you she's beautiful. Why won't you marry someone from the Colony?"

"They are low-caste," says one boy.

"What does that mean?" asks Shankar.

"They have no manners, they don't keep their homes nice," says a girl.

"Oh," says Shankar. "And you think everybody in your caste has good manners and a nice clean home?"

"It's always been like this," says another boy. "It's how our grandfathers organized it."

"But your grandfather died twenty years ago," says Shankar, "and today is today. So what do you think? Is it a good arrangement? Because if it's not, you can change it."

"But they look after dead bodies," says another boy.

Silence.

"O.K.," says Shankar, seating himself comfortably on the edge of a desk. "Let's talk about something called 'division of labour'. Have you heard of this? No? It's a very important idea in economics. It's like this. Say there are three carpenters

who work together. One enjoys cutting and planing wood, another likes making the joints and putting together the different pieces, and the third one likes finishing and polishing the product. Over time each becomes very good at what they are doing but none of them is good at everything. So they all need each other if they are making a chair or table. This is a little bit like the difference between castes. Originally each caste had a speciality, but they all needed each other in order to live."

Shankar gets up and walks over to a boy in the back row. "Erumalai. If I give you a pair of scissors will you give me a hair-cut?"

"No."

"Why not? I'll pay you well."

"I don't know how to do it."

"Right. That's why you have people from the barber caste who are trained to do this. And there are people who will come and take away the dead body when somebody dies. Or would you prefer to do this yourself, Erumalai?"

"No!"

"But it has to be done, yes?"

"Yes."

"So caste is like a division of labour." Shankar walks quietly to the front of the class. "So is there anything wrong with caste? Think about your villages, think about the Colony."

Silence. Then...

"It's bad when it separates people," says one boy.

"Ah."

The bell rings. In one hour the lesson has ranged across history, economics, geography, sanitation, local politics, caste. Shankar has moved easily around the room, now joking with, now challenging, this lively class of 12 year olds. Not only does he know them all well, he knows their parents and grandparents as well as the history and local politics of the villages they come from. He is helping them to think about themselves and the society they live in, to engage with the big issues like power and caste, but in a way which includes everybody; which allows everybody to feel they are making an important contribution.

It's a powerful reminder that, with all the talk about new curricula and teaching aids, there's no substitute for those inspiring teachers who, as Socrates put it, are 'midwives of souls'.

Alan