

Auroville Today

NOVEMBER 2009, No.249

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Auroville always seems to be in movement, but one area where experimentation seems particularly pronounced at the moment is education. In this issue we look at four interesting new initiatives.

Two of Auroville's outreach schools, Aikiyam primary school and New Era Secondary School, have started to work with a new syllabus created by India's Central Board of Secondary Education, which eminently fits within the ideals of integral education.

In the Botanical Gardens, some Aurovillian parents and teachers are experimenting with 'open classroom' learning for a small group of children. They call it 'The Learning Community'. Over in Sadhana Forest, an innovative three year Environmental Leadership Course for 'anybody, any age' is underway.

Finally, we profile a programme which, for many years, has been bringing American students to Auroville on short-term courses: Living Routes.



Aikiyam School students (left to right) Immanuel, Velvizhi, Murali, Arul, Vignesh, Surendar, and Darshan (below the camera) learn about camera use from Surya during the Auroville Film Festival '09

Expanding Auroville's educational options

In order to ensure high-quality education for the local population two of Auroville's outreach schools, Aikiyam and New Era Secondary School, became affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education. This may benefit Auroville education as a whole.

Rod Hemsell joined Auroville in October 1968. He left in 1983 and returned in 2005, after having worked for more than twenty years as an educator in the USA. Upon his return he got involved with the educational scene in and around Auroville. Here he describes his work and vision.

"Soon after I came back, I started spending time in the classrooms of two of Auroville's outreach schools, New Creation Bilingual School and After School. I discovered that the level of education was deplorable. The teachers and support group were aware of this and wanted to change, but they were handicapped as the local population had acquired a bias towards certificated learning. They wanted their children to get secondary education and maybe college benefits. The easy way to do that was to have the students take the Tamil Nadu State Board examinations at the 8th, 10th and 12th standards. At New Creation the educational level went up to 8th and at After School to the 10th standard.

"Till the 7th standard, the children were enjoying a kind of child-centred activity-based learning programme which had been influenced by Dr. Heidi Watts of Antioch New England Graduate School in the USA. Heidi is an activity-based learning specialist who had been advising the Auroville schools during her regular visits over the past 10 years. Her work notwithstanding, the curriculum they followed was quite haphazard.

"To prepare for the exams, the children were going into memorisation mode. The preparation to pass the Tamil Nadu State Board examinations is very traditional. There is no concept of student-initiated learning, only of pure rote-learning. The students were trying to memorize very poorly written materials which even the teachers were often not able to explain. The teachers would read a paragraph and the students would parrot back the paragraph. The State Board examinations are multiple

short-answer questions. In history, for example, the student would be asked to answer a hundred random factual questions that they are expected to have memorised. I noticed that in those classes the children were not learning anything; and they were not doing very well in the examinations, even after such rote learning.

"Meanwhile I had also started helping as annual report writer and editor for Auroville's Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research, SAIIER. I looked at all the material that was being presented to SAIIER by the schools. I was told by SAIIER that since a few years they had been interested in applying for some kind of recognition for the outreach schools. But it hadn't gone beyond writing some letters of enquiry to various organisations and getting back information about what they would need to do. Nobody was following up.

Researching the programmes

"I started research to find out which educational programmes and which affiliation might be best. My aims were twofold: to raise the standard of educational study for students from the villages and to try to get beyond this fixation with the Tamil Nadu State Board examinations. The options I studied were the Indira Gandhi Open School, the Central Board of Secondary Education, the Tamil Nadu Matriculation Board, the British 'O' and 'A' levels, and the International Baccalaureate.

"During this research I discovered that in 2005, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) had published an educational reform strategy. The NCERT is the apex resource organisation set up by the Government of India to advise the Central and State Governments on academic matters related to school education. Earlier, in the nineties, the NCERT had produced a very critical report on the state of education in the country known as the Yash Pal Report. Then they published the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF). I

was very impressed by it. It is an absolutely progressive document, child-centred, activity-based, and as far as the theory of learning goes, absolutely correct. It is what the Auroville schools have done at their best, though not always that well.

"On the basis of the concepts laid out in the NCF, the NCERT started creating textbooks. They were a revelation to me. I rate them as 'excellent', comparable to the best in the world. I have been a teacher and a principal of progressive schools in the USA for the last 20 years and have designed curricula for schools and this is very much on the same line. The textbooks are well-written, colourful, intelligent and have activities on practically every page. A teacher can actually just do the activities and not necessarily teach the text, and the children learn through doing, discovering and being creative. I felt that this material was eminently suitable to Auroville.

The CBSE programme

"The organisation of the Central Government that is responsible for secondary education is the Central Board of Secondary Education, CBSE. They adopted the new NCERT syllabus and textbooks for both primary and secondary education. But the CBSE is an elite educational programme, available to only 10% of the students in the country. The CBSE has created schools around the country primarily for the children of IAS officers, doctors, lawyers, professional citizens who are themselves highly educated and require good education for their children. The schools employ highly qualified teachers, and are accountable to the Central Government.

"I proposed that New Creation Bilingual School and After School adopt this system. The question was, can we do it? In order for students to be in this programme and qualify for the CBSE certificates, the school has to be formally affiliated to the CBSE. I looked at the affiliation process, and it looked doable. I made presentations to the

Auroville School Board and the SAIIER Board, and after some months, with Heidi Watt's help, we convinced everybody that we should go for it. SAIIER, however, did not want to be the agency applying for it so I was given the green light to apply for these two schools independently.

"We started the affiliation process. At the same time we introduced the NCERT/CBSE textbooks and started training teachers to use the materials. That was in 2006-2007. The CBSE sent principals of CBSE schools in Tamil Nadu to inspect our schools and programmes and were pleased that we had everything already in place. After overcoming some legal hurdles – there were some problems understanding the legal status of the Auroville Foundation and its schools, which were solved with the help of Dr. Karan Singh and the Foundation Secretary – we received our affiliation around August 2008. Meanwhile New Creation Bilingual School changed its name to Aikiyam School (the word Aikiyam means 'harmony, oneness, unity' in both Tamil and Sanskrit); and After School became New Era Secondary School (NESS).

Students' results

"As newly affiliated schools we were supposed to wait for two years before sending students for examinations, so that we would have time to properly prepare them. Since we had already introduced the programme, our request to waive this requirement for our 12th standard students was accepted. In summer this year, our first batch of eight 12th standard graduates took the CBSE examinations. It was a success. Only one student failed in one examination, the others passed with quite good marks and are now in colleges.

"All of the students, in fact, did much better than expected. They passed the exams without having had the normal CBSE preparations for the 6th up to 10th standards. They only had been taught the materials of the 11th and 12th standards.

continued on page 2

- **Shankar teaches a class at Aikiyam**
- **The OutreachMedia team on filming Auroville**

pages 2-3

- **The Living Routes programme**
- **The Learning Community**
- **Training environmental leaders at Sadhana Forest**

pages 4-5

- **Yatra: a pilgrimage in the arts**
- **The aspirations of youth**
- **The enthusiasts of Freeland**
- **New publications**

pages 6-7

- **Passings: Perumal and Narayan**
- **Julie Sauerwein on 'Little by little'**
- **Caring for our lifelines**

pages 7-8