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 local ethos.

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.

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 Hernell joined Auroville in December 1968. He left in 1983 and returned in 2005, after having worked for more than twenty years 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: the Aikiyam primary and the New Era Secondary 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 adopted 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 certificate, 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 CBSE Board and the SAIER Board, and after some months, with Heidi Watt’s help, we convinced everybody that we should go for it. SAIER, 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.”

Shankar teaches a class at Aikiyam.

The Outreach Media team on filming Auroville.

The Living Routes programme.

The Learning Community.

Training environmental leaders at Sadhana Forest.

Yatra: a pilgrimage in the arts.

The aspirations of youth.

The enthusiasts of Freeland.

New publications.

Passings: Perumal and Narayan.

Julie Sauerwein on ‘Little by little’.

Caring for our lifelines.

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