Expanding Auroville’s educational options

As of today, there are three options for students of Auroville’s outreach schools. One is the Tamil Nadu State Board examinations. The Kalipulayam 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. Udvari follows the Tamil Nadu Matriculation System although they have a strong English medium preparation. And then there are the 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 Drepung) don’t have a curriculum that follows a 1st to 5th grade sequence. For these reasons, a CBSE affiliation for Auroville schools is not easy. I recommend instead that the primary schools consider adopting the CBSE syllabus without formally affiliating themselves to the CBSE. Then they would cover that area of difficulty which is now a handicap for both teachers and students; and they would have a far more systematic line with the ideas of Auroville while still being able to use their current and additional resources to supplement the syllabus.

I am speaking here about content, not about methodology. Here, it is likely that I would find myself in disagreement with those in Auroville who believe in ‘integral’ or ‘holistic’ education, say ‘free progress’, ‘integral education’ or ‘activity-based learning’ is always more important than content. Learning about 20th century history in human geography and the human development index, for example, is important information on any methodology. Methodology and content are equally important.

For a very quickly preparable preparation, the students who leave any of the primary schools can then decide where they want to study next. One option is to let the students of Auroville, who so far have sent their children to Pondicherry schools or Kalipulayam Trust School, 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 a few other CBSE schools, one nearby JIPMER, the other next to PIMS in Kalapet. It is conceivable that the CBSE schools in Pondicherry, or Pondicherry schools, might send students to Pondicherry, but it is also conceivable that, in the longer term, a residual 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 Carol Shankar

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

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 knows how to do anything else. Each of them needs the other person in order to live.

Shankar gets up and walks over to a boy in the back row. “Frangois, you ever got a pair of scissors from us, will you give me a hair-cut?”

“No.”

“Why not? I pay you well.”

“I don’t know how to do it.”

“Right. That’s why you have people from the barber’s cutters 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, Frangois?”

“I don’t know whether to do it.”

“Even if you don’t know how to do it.”

Shankar laughs. “You’re thinking that ‘tribal’ sounds like ‘nutribai’ so the two is connect- ed but not.”

“Are people from the Colony?”

“Shankar is the Colony is a part of some villages where members of the scheduled castes, formerly known as ‘Untouchables’, live separately.”

“No. The tribes 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. Will Muni’s father say ‘What will you say, Muni? Will you marry her?’ Muni shakes his head.

Learning to think

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Shankar with a class at Aikyam School

Shankar with a class at Aikyam School

ow, 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 – “Our hands when we eat.”

“Ladies put flowers in their hair.”

“My grandpa has cows.”

“We don’t use a clock.”

“Oh. Shankar pauses. “You remember you talked about Haripura and those other cities from thousands of years ago and that we are now being excavat- ed?” Yes. “Imagine that your village are covered with a huge layer of dust, and many years in the future people will dig them. What conclusions will they draw about how you lived? Well, one thing they will say is that there were an uncivilized people that we 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 mohini here need their morning tea!”

Everybody laughs.

Now,” Shankar puts his hands together and glances around him. “You see in a village it comes to your villages from a place far away. He asks about your customs and you tell him, ‘Oh, what a Yoga! What a Muslim! What a Hindu! Crackers.’ He will say, ‘How can you do this? You should be quiet. All of you have to be quiet.’

For a moment, silence. Then a small girl in the front row speaks up. “We won’t let him change us.”

“Why not, suppose I’m that man and I have a lot of money. You know how things are done in the village. I’ll go to the headman and offer him some money. Then I’ll say...’Then we’ll call the police,’ says another student. ‘Or we’ll send Shankar to his grandfather.’

The class go quiet. ‘You see,’ says Shankar, “it’s not so easy to oppose the powerful. But there have been examples.

He tells a story of a man of India hanged in front of the classroom and sweeps his hands across Bihari, Oriya and West Bengal. “This area was known as Chotanagpur and 150 years ago a man did stand up to the most powerful people at that time, who happened to be the British. His name was Munda. He was also standing up to the local land- lords who were cheating the tribal out of their lands. Now, what is a tribal?”

“Somebody who lives by a river?”

Shankar laughs. “You’re thinking that ‘tribal’ sounds like ‘nutribai’ so the two is connect- ed but not.”

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