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Editor

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RITAM
A bi-annual journal of material and spiritual researches in Auroville

Our aim:

- This is a journal under SAIIER connecting the various units under its umbrella with the focus on education and other related areas of research.

- The purpose is to create a space where we express and share our work in Auroville and also invite others to share their perceptions with a view to look at where we stand with reference to the ideal.

- It will publish articles, interviews etc. which are relevant to the Charter of Auroville, both from people in Auroville as well as those from elsewhere.

- This journal is for both Aurovilians as well as others who are looking to Auroville for pioneering work in many fields.

- The goal is to understand better the spirit of Auroville and in that context what we are doing and what further we can do.
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Thoughts on the Symbolism of Auroville
by Joseba, Auroville 21-02-2007

Cities are mankind’s greatest creations. The establishment of every beautiful city of the world has always implied the concurrence of multiple disciplines integrated in a harmonious approach. A powerful vision and careful planning as a starting point, the inclusion of innovative architecture, art, engineering, landscaping, and an unending flow of financial resources... these are only some of the most necessary components; to enumerate all would be a tedious exercise. Only when the conjunction of all these ingredients has been successfully achieved can we recognize great cities that awaken our admiration. When we look to the external appearance of a city we enter into contact with the first and most external layer of information. But, beyond this first layer there are other layers of information and perception with subtle and deeper meanings. The morphology, the structure, the arrangement of a city’s most representative buildings, its residences and life activities, consciously or unconsciously are going to reveal to us the values and ideals, the socio-political order and the image that its citizens have of the cosmos and themselves. It is particularly interesting to notice also that every great culture of the world has attempted to create an Ideal City that could give a material form, a definitive shape to the most relevant aspects of its particular world-view. This was considered extremely important and meaningful for internal and external purposes in many cultures throughout history. From this viewpoint, the external shape of every city of the world is a permanent invitation for us to think and speculate from a philosophical perspective about its society and its underlying anthropological and transcendental principles. I believe that the study of the principles and designs used in various moments of history and its comparison with Auroville can be an interesting subject, because it can help us to better understand the fundamental aspects of the experiment that we are trying to develop here, and possibly shine some light on the uniqueness of Auroville’s features in relation with other cities of the world and other experiments of the past. I would like to present these reflections just as a first initial contribution to an area which until now has not aroused much interest and discussion – a very surprising fact for me in the context of Auroville.

To facilitate this analysis I will divide human history into three great periods; each one corresponding to a certain “vision of life” or broad paradigm. These three periods could be classified as the Ancient, the Modern and the Post-modern or Trans-modern. All the cities of the world traditionally have served three purposes: spiritual, political and economic. In the Ancient period, we can find in Greek and Rome a traditional pattern that was followed almost universally in the planning, design and construction of the cities. This tradition was followed later on without interruption by the founders of new cities in the Christian Age and was only discontinued with the irruption of Modernity. Interestingly, there are enough studies today to indicate that the models used in ancient times to plan cities have many elements that are common to all the archaic civilizations. The main characteristic of the ancient city is that its spiritual, political and economic aspects were incorporated in a unifying model representing its vision of the cosmic order in a hierarchical and geometrical design. The external form was only a symbolic frame, the material support to remind the citizens about and put them in contact with the deeper and latent structures of the inner and transcendent worlds. The mandala (square or round) was the first diagram utilized universally in a city-plan to define the master lines of its structure and the order of its different components. The Sanskrit term mandala not only defines a geometric form, it has broader connotations and symbolically includes the notions of symmetry, harmony and totality.
If we consider the mandala in fig.1, we can symbolically analyze its elements as follows: the dot at the centre represents the sacred, the origin of everything. Around it is the circle. In the past this line marked the location of the citadel walls. But the circle is also the limit or the periphery of the order created, and contains in itself the emanative radiation from the centre to every point of its surface. This connection between the centre and the periphery is applicable to the dynamics of any territorial system where its coherence will depend on the constant flow of information between the centre and the surrounding areas which in that way become interconnected in a meaningful common unity.

Normally in the plan of the ancient city, whether round or square (see fig. 2), we will find that the temple is located at the centre. The temple lodges the presence of God and symbolically represents the centrality that the ancient mentality attributed to the sacred dimension in all the activities of life. This central place will contain its most intimate nucleus: the altar where the principal ritual to be performed will be the sacrifice. Associated with the altar another important element is the fire. The fire and the space around it was the most important place in the life of families at that time, since it was around its warmth and light that the members would gather. The fire burning in the altar is an element common to many different cultures and many times we find this element also at the centre of public spaces such as the Agora or the Senate. Symbolically it has always represented clarity of understanding, the inner light that should illumine every human being and his/her actions. This inner commitment of the individual to a belief system was considered to be the most stable foundation on which to base the communality of life. Around the centre and in a hierarchical order we find the public spaces for the institutions, the government, tribunals etc. And finally, following again a hierarchical order, we have spaces for residences and economic-commercial activities. All these institutions have the mission not only to ensure the necessary security, order and good governance but also to guarantee the transmission of the collective knowledge of the city, its foundational ideals, values, laws, traditions, and individual and collective rituals. The participation of the citizens in the public institutions, and the spaces reserved for the ceremonies and rituals, were extremely important to encourage their involvement in a shared belief system and the creation of a moral vision holding the city together.

Another important aspect existing in many cities of the past was the myth of the foundation. The initiative of founding a new city was believed to have a supernatural origin and the founder of the city to have received the divine inspiration about when, where and how the city had to be founded. In the West, Hercules was considered the main founder of many cities from Hispania to the Far East. The commemoration and rituals on the mythical foundational date were very important, and every year the priests of every city would perform the ceremonies to actualize the commitment of the city to its foundational ideals.
We can see another example in fig. 3.

This is a Hindu urban model called Nandyavarta. The axis of the major streets irradiate from the centre, where the Vedic altar is situated. From its fire will emanate four concentric square rings which correspond to the four Varnas that shape the social order. The most intimate ring, next to the altar, is reserved for the priest. The warriors are located in the second ring, protecting the sacred functions. The two following functions, the economic and the residential, occupy the periphery. The plan has a mandalic structure and is organized also in a pyramidal sense to express the concept of hierarchy.

These ancient views about planning and the construction of cities were completely discontinued with the coming of the Modern age. Modernity was born in Europe between the 16th and the 18th centuries. This movement brought up a complete shift of paradigm. Slowly the ways of understanding life, the implicit values of the system, the basic way of perceiving, thinking, valuing and doing associated with a particular vision of the reality was changed. In brief, the main characteristics of the new paradigm and their relevance for this work could be synthesized thus: the sacred is no longer the centre of life and all its activities as it was in the ancient or archaic age; it is only acceptable as a private choice. The society has been secularized and there is a wall of almost absolute separation between the public and the private. Nature and physical reality are not considered any longer as sacred; the world becomes a disenchanted world. In the public spaces there is no place for any manifestation of the sacred aspect. Together with the centre, the limiting circle has also gone. The citizens are now free from all the limiting dogmas, morals and conventions of the past. The only accepted limit is a reasonable pragmatism provided by reason. As a consequence there is a very interesting phenomenon of substitution, in which the centre and the limit is occupied now by modern man and his activities. Gods and Goddesses are substituted by Reason and the only accepted methodology and understanding of reality is provided by Science. The spiritual concept of community is substituted now by a free aggregation of individuals. In the best case scenario, it is by the social contract established between the citizens that the modern state is founded and the society reconstituted.

The first consequence of this modern paradigm when applied to the area of urbanism is that the predominant approaches to planning become merely rational and utilitarian. The driving force and the shape of the cities are going to be primarily determined by the economy and by the erratic expansions-contractions of its cycles. During this period the history of urbanism has witnessed the rise and decline of a number of different types of cities. Now at the beginning of the 21st century we have as a predominant model the global city or the Megacity. In 1950, only two cities in the world, London and New York, had populations larger than 10 million; according to the latest reports of the United Nations, in 2015 there will be more than twenty three of these megacities. Some of these cities, for example in China, are expected to reach populations of 40 million. At the same time there are at least 600 million urbanites in developing countries surviving in squatter settlements, called by various names: favelas, barriadas, shantytowns or kachti adabis. Some of these megacities have grown amid persistent economic stagnation as well as social and political dysfunction. Many of them have failed to provide basic infrastructures to their residents. With the increasing size of the cities these problems are also growing exponentially and the situation of many cities is becoming more and more unsustainable.

These evident pathologies of the megacities are symptoms pointing to a more severe diagnosis, and that is that the modern paradigm is undergoing a fatal crisis. It is necessary to recognize that Modernity brought up new and revolutionary principles and has contributed immensely to positively shaping our societies in a great number of areas. But this movement had also
many weak points and insufficiencies. In the last three centuries, the importance of these critical points has emerged with more and more force. Modernity helped humanity to develop its external capacities and means, science, technologies, and economy immensely, but all of this without developing simultaneously its inner counterpart, i.e. morality, ethics, and spirituality. This period of time has offered the possibility to test the behavior of societies guided predominantly by the reason, in which the importance of the spiritual centre and the limiting circle of ethics and morality has been disregarded. In fact, it could be pointed out that the majority of the tragedies of the 20th century, with its countless conflicts, wars, and massacres, had their origin in this basic imbalance. It is perhaps becoming more evident now that a society deprived of strong ideals and lacking any clear spiritual goal leads at the end where other similar attempts ended in the past, in an inevitable process of decay and death. It is clear also that this way of seeing life is becoming progressively obsolete and one of the most urgent necessities of our present time is to surpass it. This necessity has been recognized in the last decades by an increasing number of people, and today we see a flourishing of post-modern or trans-modern approaches in a number of areas striving to articulate alternatives beyond this approach. Humankind needs desperately to find different ways of dealing with nature, society and ourselves as individuals, a new and completely different paradigm of civilization. The present one could hardly be considered as such; in reality it is more appropriate to describe it as semi-barbaric. It is clear to me also, that the real depth of the present crisis has not been sufficiently understood by contemporary thinking. Sri Aurobindo has substantiated much better its understanding when he defined the present crisis as an evolutionary crisis. This is the real dimension of the problem and only with appropriate answers at this level can we expect to find adequate solutions.

Every society in the world is always determined and is an expression of the evolution of its individuals and not the opposite. If we look into history from a psychological viewpoint we discover that human society has progressed through certain distinct psychological cycles or stages, which Sri Aurobindo defined as: symbolic, typal, conventional, individualistic and subjective. We are right now living in the middle of a transitional period, perhaps a passage between the subjective age and a spiritual age. The main feature of this subjective age is that increasing numbers of people are going beyond the limited truths of the social conventionalism, trying to discover by themselves the validity of the truths of life and refusing any external authority. In this

...new turn inwards, towards a greater subjectivity now only beginning, is there a better hope; for by that turning it may discover that the real truth of man is to be found in his soul. It is not indeed certain that a subjective age will lead us there, but it gives us the possibility, can turn in that direction, if used rightly, the more inward movement.


In this process towards a greater subjectivity, when knowledge is diffusing itself with an unprecedented rapidity, when the individuals are compelled to find the real roots of their problems, when external remedies for the maladies of our societies have been tried exhaustively in the last centuries and failed, the opportunity to re-discover the neglected inner dimension of our being can become imperative again and this subjective age become the passage to a different goal: a spiritual age. Sri Aurobindo foresaw this process thus:

Therefore the coming of a spiritual age must be preceded by the appearance of an increasing number of individuals who are no longer satisfied with the normal intellectual, vital and physical existence of man, but perceive that a greater evolution is the real goal of humanity and attempt to effect it in themselves, to lead others to it and to make it the recognised goal of the race. In proportion as they succeed and to the degree to which they carry this evolution, the yet unrealised potentiality which they represent will become an actual possibility of the future. 

Ibid., p. 263

The manifestation into matter of this spiritual vision required at a certain moment the creation of new fields of experimentation in which to test the validity of these new spiritual discoveries and at the same time give progressively a concrete shape to this vision. This is the perspective indicated by the Mother in a message written for a UNESCO committee in the year 1969:

The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo’s vision was entrusted to the Mother. The creation of a new world, a new
humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken. By the very nature of things, it is a collective ideal that calls for a collective effort so that may be realized in the terms of an integral human perfection.

The Ashram, founded and built by the Mother, was the first step towards the accomplishment of this goal. The project of Auroville is the next step, more exterior, which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind.

The Mother, MCW 13:204

From the spiritual perspective it is necessary to point out that Auroville was born right after and as a direct consequence of the manifestation of the Supramental Force on Earth. This transcendental event means that the spirit is going to disclose new and supreme powers of consciousness with an unimaginable capacity of transformation that had not been operative in the earth-consciousness until now. The magnitude of this radical spiritual change and its new ideals should be better expressed with new forms and symbols. The human being from the most ancient times has felt the necessity of expressing through symbols the realities which escape the scope of the rational mind. A symbol, according to Sri Aurobindo, is a form in one plane that represents a truth of another. The greatness of the art of symbol-making depends on the closeness to the truth that is communicated by the symbol employed. Perhaps the highest expression of art is that which can communicate and express the mysterious, the veiled presence of the spirit.

According to the hypothesis of this paper, all the external elements of this new city should configure a symbolic geometric model with the power to establish the necessary linkages, the nexus of union between the inner and the outer dimensions of life. The external forms of the city, its most relevant buildings and spaces should be powerful generators of speculative associations, suggestive references and illuminating revelations. At its highest level, the geometry may form a “Sacred Geometry” with the primary purpose of facilitating the process of inner discovery. This possibility is of paramount importance in a city like Auroville.

If we examine some of the principles and symbols that are guiding the manifestation of Auroville as a city we will discover some interesting facts. One of the most striking is the number of similarities between the symbolic pattern followed in the design of the cities in ancient times and those followed in the design of Auroville. The first parallelism is the presence again of the supernatural as the origin of the initiative to build the city. When the question was put to the Mother as early as 1965 as to who had taken the initiative for the construction of Auroville, Her unambiguous answer was: The Supreme Lord (MCW 13:188). The Mother played a decisive role as a mediator; she had in her consciousness a very well-defined vision to be implemented. The next step was to find a person with the necessary qualities to receive and undertake her futuristic vision. From the beginning she entrusted the project to a well recognized French architect: Roger Anger.

I had my plan of Auroville. Now I have my general plan; I am waiting for R. to make the detailed plans because from the beginning I have said, “R. will be the architect,” and I have written to R. Mother’s Agenda, 23.6.65

The qualities that Roger has demonstrated during all these years, his visionary capacity, inexhaustible creativity, his permanent quest for the forms of the future and most important, his capacity to synergize his unquestionable professional talent with the Mother’s vision were perhaps the reasons for her choice. In any case, they worked together in a symbiotic relationship for several years, developing not only the main lines of the project, but also the details of some central elements, as it was done with the most meticulous accuracy for Matrimandir and its surrounding area.

Before arriving at the “Galaxy” concept several successive layouts were made, each one representing a different stage in the search for a model that could represent consistently the Mother’s Vision. Two first models were presented at the same time by Roger to the Mother, and studied in parallel: the square one (see fig. 4) and the model called the Nebula (see fig. 5).
One may note that the square model is very similar to the ancient patterns that we have seen before. The interesting fact is that this model was rejected by the Mother and she chose the circular one as a starting point. Perhaps these forms were excessively static and unable to represent the strong evolutionary dynamism that the Mother wanted to lay down. But probably the most important reason was that this concept was not expressing what the Mother had come into contact with. In a conversation with Satprem at the beginning of Auroville, she made this enigmatic comment:

...It’s sure to work, I KNOW it exists – the city is already there (it has been for many, many years)... The city already exists... And the remarkable thing is that I simply told R. [the architect] the broad outlines, asking him if he was interested. Then he went back to France and he received my formation (my old formation, which I myself had left asleep); he received it there. I found that very interesting. He received it, he said to me, “It came all at once, I seemed to be possessed by something, and in one night the whole thing was done.”

The Mother, Mother’s Agenda, 23.4.66

This design concept was followed by another circular module with two central mega-structures (fig. 6)

Finally the “Galaxy” model emerged and received the approval of the Mother along with her “blessings.” (See fig. 7)
This form can evoke also the analogy of the real galaxies, which are always in an unending movement, rotating around an axis and evolving new and higher forms of life. This city has been designed to be in a perpetual movement of accelerated evolution, radiating from its spiritual centre, the Matrimandir. At the centre of the city, there is a complex containing three main elements, all placed within an area with the form of an oval. (See fig. 8):

These three elements are the Matrimandir and its petals, encircled by the Park of Unity with twelve gardens, the Banyan Tree, and finally the amphitheater with the white marble lotus-bud-shaped vase which contains handfuls of soil from many nations of the world. At the boundaries of this area, there will be tall trees, to represent Aspiration and Unity. The encircling oval with its different elements was conceived as a symbol of the fundamental unity of creation. The Mother also gave the overall dimensions of this area, with the gardens and the park in relation to the dimensions of Matrimandir. It is 10 times the height of the Matrimandir and 10 times its length (290 and 360 ms). In the future the entire area will be surrounded by an artificial lake. This oval was envisaged by the Mother as an island, with the lake enhancing greatly the feeling of isolation and the calmness in the area. The lake should be an integral part – not merely a decorative element – of the Matrimandir area. Besides its symbolic dimension it should have an essential function in the water supply system for the city and the green belt areas.

The Matrimandir has multiple meanings and its crucial significance was declared by the Mother in two concrete statements:

The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Divine’s answer to man’s aspiration for perfection. Union with the Divine manifesting in a progressive human unity.  

and

The Matrimandir will be the soul of Auroville. The sooner the soul is there, the better it will be for everybody and especially for the Aurovilians.

In the same interview mentioned before, Roger gives another complementary perspective: “Here is revealed the second spiritual meaning of the Matrimandir: Until now, the consciousness was emerging from the depths of matter. But there is another force, another consciousness, which is secretly similar to the first one. Yes, remember that we spoke of the light coming from above. These are two powers: one is hidden in the sacred heart of things and is at once their reason for being, their basis and their life. It is a rising force; a power breaks open the crust of matter. But there is also a descending power that comes from the height, from the Supreme level, a down-going force that awakens. It stimulates the emergence of an ever new creation. The conjunction, the meeting of these two forces in the heart of the Matrimandir symbolizes the perfect Realization.”

(Roger Anger, Interview April 1971)

The Matrimandir is supported by four pillars. According to Sri Aurobindo, the evolutionary principle of creation is manifested through four main powers:

Four great Aspects of the Mother, four of her leading Powers and Personalities have stood in front in her guidance of this Universe and in her dealings with the terrestrial play.

Sri Aurobindo, The Mother, SABCL 25:25

Consequently, as in a supreme invocation calling for the manifestation of these powers, the pillars were named with the names of these four great aspects: Maheswari in the South, Mahakali in the North, Mahalaksmi in the East, and Mahasaraswati in the West. Even though the whole city with all its multiple activities can serve as a channel to manifest the spiritual force that the Matrimandir irradiates, there is an area in which various symbolic elements have been concentrated with the specific purpose to intensify and facilitate a process similar to a “Spiritual Initiation.” Interestingly this is another parallelism with the initiatory rituals and celebrations of ancient times. In the case of Auroville this process is meant to
happen in the Matrimandir area. Roger has described this process:

This inner pilgrimage which, for some, can end with the visit to the inner chamber, begins with the crossing of the bridge that will connect the city area with the island. As in Sri Aurobindo’s symbol, the water represents the multiplicity, the creation. When the pilgrim has arrived, the island will be exposed facing the powerful vision of Matrimandir’s exterior, covered with the golden disks that seems to emerge from the crater of the earth between the half-opened petals. The second stage begins with the discovery of the twelve gardens; each one of them represents a specific state of consciousness: Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, Light, Life, Power, Wealth, Utility, Progress, Youth, Harmony, and Perfection. As the pilgrim moves within the gardens he ought to be able to internalize the experience of this specific state of consciousness. All together they reproduce the symbol of the Mother. And this is a kind of seal which is integrated into the whole project. The third stage continues going on a downward path between the petals, a descent leading to the marble “lotus pond” and to the meditation chambers. The Matrimandir’s meditation chambers are again twelve, each one of them represents an attribute of the Mother and has also the corresponding colour. They are Sincerity, Humility, Gratitude, Perseverance, Aspiration, Receptivity, Progress, Courage, Goodness, Generosity, Equality, and Peace. It is interesting to note that the first eight concern the attitude towards the Divine, and the last four towards humanity. The upward climb towards the Matrimandir is made via four large stairways inserted in the four pillars that support the Matrimandir. The four entrance doors leading to the passage are self-effacing; they want to evoke in the pilgrim the feeling of being invited into the interior. The fourth stage begins with the circular entrance hall; the access to the vast interior space of Matrimandir is reached by a narrow selective passageway, comparable to the doors of hallowed places. By its form and color, the sheer size, the tinted light, the play of spiral ramps, everything is a preparation to the ascension to the inner chamber. Crossing the platform leading to the two ramps is marked by a difference in level, which creates the pause needed for the accomplishment of the last stage of the journey, the slow ascent to the discovery of Mother’s chamber. In this bare room only illuminated with the white light radiated from the crystal ball is the place where the pilgrim will face the Mother’s Darshan.

At this point it is necessary to remark some significant differences between the Galaxy model and the models followed in the past. These variations are very important because they are going to express important characteristics of this new spirituality and at the same time mark inevitable differences from the old religions. If we take the Hindu model for instance, we will see that the first concentric “ring” around the centre was reserved for the priests in order to allow them to develop their important function as mediators between the sacred and the faithful. This was a fundamental arrangement not only in the Hindu but in other religious organizations. In the Galaxy concept this arrangement has disappeared, and along with it the important function of having a sacerdotal caste. In the new spirituality this function has become irrelevant. The “spiritual initiation” and the access to Matrimandir are accessible to everyone, without the necessity of any mediation. This is a very significant difference in my opinion, because what this architectural language indicates is that a decisive transition has been made between the old religious order and a new spiritual approach.

The entire pilgrimage is another interesting metaphor with a double meaning, one symbolic and the other interior. At a symbolic level it gives expression to one of the central tenets in Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual philosophy and praxis; i.e. the absolute necessity of the inner journey that every human being has to make sooner or later to his most inner part in order to discover, and be transformed by, the spiritual powers of his soul. As in the Matrimandir, which holds at its very depths the inner chamber, in human beings the soul lies deep inside, silent in the splendour of its own light. The external journey, going through the various symbolic stages, contributes with various psychological experiences towards the awakening of latent spiritual faculties in order to facilitate the most complete and integral spiritual experience. The last stage with the entry into the inner chamber, as happened in the ancient temples of the past, is of transcendental significance because this is the place for the sacrifice. In this case the emphasis is given to the inner sacrifice, the unconditional offering of the entire being to the Supreme Mother. The supramental divine force will descend according to the sincerity and the aspiration of the pilgrims and will grant the necessary boons towards their divine transformation.
In its insuperable style Savitri has suggested the nature of this spiritual metamorphosis thus:

The supermind shall claim the world for Light
And thrill with love of God the enamoured heart
And place Light’s crown on Nature’s lifted head
And found Light’s reign on her unshaking base.
A greater truth than earth’s shall roof-in earth
And shed its sunlight on the roads of mind;
A power infallible shall lead the thought,
A seeing Puissance govern life and act,
In earthly hearts kindle the Immortal’s fire.
A soul shall wake in the Inconscient’s house;
The mind shall be God-vision’s tabernacle,
The body intuition’s instrument,
And life a channel for God’s visible power.
All earth shall be the Spirit’s manifest home,
Hidden no more by the body and the life,
Hidden no more by the mind’s ignorance;
An unerring Hand shall shape event and act.
The Spirit’s eyes shall look through Nature’s eyes,
The Spirit’s force shall occupy Nature’s force.

p. 707

The inner transformation is only the first and indispensable movement of the human being in his ascent towards the spirit, but the second essential movement in this new approach is the descent of the Spirit directed towards the transformation of the entire life:

Therefore a society which was even initially spiritualised would make the revealing and finding of the divine Self in man the supreme, even the guiding aim of all its activities, its education, its knowledge, its science, its ethics, its art, its economical and political structure.

Sri Aurobindo, The Human Cycle, CWSA 25:256

Here is where the necessity of the city-plan became absolutely imperative. The residential, industrial, cultural and international areas represent the most essential activities of our life; each one of these activities in the context of Auroville will start from and use the knowledge and the means that past efforts had put at their disposal, but each of these activities is also to become a field of specific research in which to apply the transformative dynamism of this spiritual force. If we observe the action of the Spirit in the past achievements of humankind, or in its movement towards the future, we will see that its action inspires a constant rediscovery, a new formulation and larger synthesis in the mind, and a mighty remoulding of all life’s activities. The most essential thing that must take precedence over the others is the transformation of the whole life, led by the Spirit, not just a simple superficial change or a mere colouring of its activities. We have seen that the best cities of the past could thrive when they had a sacred centre providing order and inspiring their inhabitants with a common purpose and shared vision. The galactic spiral whirl as a symbol indicates exactly this motion of connecting the spiritual consciousness-force from its centre to the totality of the city and its life, transmitting a movement of uplifting transformation. The essential purpose of this experiment has been from its beginning to embody the ideal of human unity. The only way to move towards a real unity is to realize that it is when we live in identification with our spiritual being that we are one with the divine Reality and one with all the other beings. It is by not living in our egos that the real unity becomes possible. This basic spiritual fact neglected or ignored by the various attempts made in the past was the main reason for their failures; this should be the main focal point to be considered by any new attempt. With that purpose the city was planned for a maximum population of 50,000 persons. We can infer that this is the critical mass necessary to achieve successfully this goal. These citizens will be volunteers from different nationalities, from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, who come to live and work together. They will strive to go beyond any preconceived idea and the limitations of their own origins, religious and cultural backgrounds, exploring more integral ways of facing the infinite number of problems and challenges that an enterprise like this is going to meet. They will work essentially in themselves because it is in their own being that they are going to find the most obstinate resistance to hastening the evolution of the human consciousness and making this ideal possible.

After these reflections we can arrive at several conclusions:

a) Every new age, every new cycle in the history of humankind has seen the creation of an Ideal City as the most appropriated medium to express its highest values and ideals. This historical sequence is repeating again with the Mother’s decision of again choosing a city for the manifestation of her new creation.
b) The direct involvement of the Mother in the exercise of searching for and selecting the most appropriated city-model to materialize her vision conveys the importance of the concept finally accepted. The Galaxy-concept takes the ancient mandalic symbol with a centre and a circular shape, but expresses it in a new and more dynamic form. There are many parallelisms with the geometrical diagrams followed by the ancient cities, but this model introduces significant modifications giving a symbolical expression to the crucial concepts of this new spirituality.

c) The primary and most prominent purpose of the galaxy model and its symbolism is to give the most perfect expression possible to the city’s spiritual dimension, the integral evolution of human consciousness hastened by the descent of the Supermind. The other more practical dimensions are subordinated and secondary to the main purpose. This view is reinforced by the fact that the division of the city-activities into four areas, something which is unusual in contemporary town-planning, was one of the central elements from the Mother’s very first sketches.

d) By its dimension, the complexity of its different elements and the magnitude of its scope, this city becomes a symbolic point of concentration for the present evolutionary difficulties that the earth is facing. It is in a platform of this nature that it is possible to essay the new and revolutionary solutions that the Spirit wants to disclose at this new stage of its never-ending evolution. In that sense we can say that Auroville becomes a laboratory of advanced spiritual research for humanity as a whole. The destiny of humankind was shaped greatly in the past in their most representative cities; perhaps its destiny wants to vest again in another city the best hope for its future.

1. For example, Jose Olives Puig, *La Ciudad Cautiva*.
3. Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother* SABCL 25:359 “Essentially the 12 powers are the vibrations that are necessary for the complete manifestation”. “Four is the number signifying a square, fullness, completeness”.
**Modern and ancient use of words**

We moderns use words as counters without any memory or appreciation of their original sense; when we speak we think of the object spoken of, not at all of the expressive word which is to us a dead and brute thing, mere coin of verbal currency with no value of its own. In early language the word was on the contrary a living thing with essential powers of signification; its root meanings were remembered because they were still in use, its wealth of force was vividly present to the mind of the speaker. We say “wolf” and think only of the animal, any other sound would have served our purpose as well, given the convention of its usage: the ancients said “tearer” and had that significance present to them. We say “agni” and think of fire, the word is of no other use to us; to the ancients “agni” means other things besides and only because of one or more of its root meanings was applied to the physical object fire. Our words are carefully limited to one or two senses, theirs were capable of a great number and it was quite easy for them, if they so chose, to use a word like Agni, Varuna or Vayu as a sound-index of a great number of connected and complex ideas, a key-word. It cannot be doubted that the Vedic Rishis did take advantage of this greater potentiality of their language.

SRI AUROBINDO

*The Hour of God: Dayananda, SABCL 17:341-42*
When a new vision of life manifests on the earth, it naturally seems to throw its light back on the past. In the Indian context, this means especially on the Veda, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Sri Aurobindo has extensively written on these texts, and The Mother in turn has commented on many of his writings and explained them in “Questions and Answers”.

My focus here is on the Veda, and I must note that Sri Aurobindo’s major writings – *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *Essays on the Gita*, *The Human Cycle*, *The Future Poetry* and of course *Savitri* – abound in Vedic references. One could almost say that Sri Aurobindo’s new vision throws its light back on the Veda and like a marvelous rainbow bridge connects the luminous past with an even more luminous future. The Mahabharata is sometimes called the fifth Veda and therefore I feel inclined to call *Savitri* the sixth Veda. As for the Mother’s *The Spiritual Significance of Flowers*; almost from the very beginning of my acquaintance with this collection, I spontaneously called it ‘The Veda of Flowers’.

But the theme to which I would like to draw the attention of the interested reader is: “Where, almost 90 years after Sri Aurobindo wrote *The Secret of the Veda*, does Vedic research stand today?” *The Secret of the Veda* was ground-breaking in many ways. Who could be better equipped to recover the lost key to the secret heart of the Veda than one who is a master seer and a great linguist at the same time, to say the least?

Sri Aurobindo considered his work on the Veda incomplete, as can be seen from the following passage from the Foreword to *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, which he wrote as late as 1946 and which is his last writing on the subject of the Veda:

… To establish on a scholastic basis the conclusions of the hypothesis [meaning his articles written thirty years earlier under the title “The Secret of the Veda”] it would have been necessary to prepare an edition of the Rig-veda or of a large part of it with a word by word construing in Sanskrit and English, notes explanatory of important points in the text and justifying the interpretation both of separate words and of whole verses and also elaborate appendices to fix firmly the rendering of key-words like rta, sravas, kratu, ketu, etc. essential to the esoteric interpretation. This…was planned, but meanwhile greater preoccupations of a permanent nature intervened and no time was left to proceed with such a considerable undertaking.

SABCL 11:19

Even so, Sri Aurobindo’s work throws much light on many aspects of Vedic research. His translations of hymns to the major deities and his commentaries on them give us an insight into the nature of each godhead and its function on different levels of manifestation. And his translations and explanations of many key words, based on his sound linguistics, supplies the other clue he has given us for a much more genuine understanding and research into the Veda than was available before. How far has the Vedic research of the 20th century made use of this ground-breaking work and how may we use it now at the beginning of the 21st century?

Over the past 30 to 40 years there have appeared quite a number of books with new translations of Vedic hymns, almost all of which seem more or less to follow the purely ritualistic and materialistic interpretation of Sayana and the European scholarship of the 19th century. Could it be that the authors were
not aware of Sri Aurobindo’s work? Or have they simply bypassed it? I know of only two authors, David Frawley and R.L. Kashyap, who have in recent times published translations of a representative number of hymns which are to a recognizable extent based on Sri Aurobindo’s work.

In my view, the material Sri Aurobindo has left for posterity is applicable to and even indispensable for any further Vedic research, even though he considered it incomplete. So I want to appeal to any fellow spiritual aspirants who are touched by *Hymns to the Mystic Fire* or *The Secret of the Veda*: cannot we come together, in a humble but still valid way, in an attempt to translate other Vedic hymns in the light of the background vision and new vocabulary which Sri Aurobindo has left for us – and thus even further test the applicability of his approach?

In this context one contribution could be, for example, to translate more hymns where some of the key words to which he has given new meanings occur in a prominent way and influence the meaning of a whole hymn. That it will work I myself am sure and I am also sure that Sri Aurobindo does not expect us to have already an overmental or even supramental inspiration for this task, or I should rather say for the joy of this work. Of course will it be helpful if we have not only been touched by his integral vision but also already tried to practice it and to a certain extent grown into it. These are in a way preconditions, which seem to have barred the pure linguist or anthropologist or even traditionalist from really entering the inner world of the Veda.

But to avoid any misunderstanding, I would like to mention here that I am aware that it is not enough just to replace the usual meanings with Sri Aurobindo’s, to get at the real sense of a hymn. For myself and probably for most of us – a long-time familiarity with the Vedic world and Sri Aurobindo’s work is almost implied – a prolonged meditation on each verse and the whole hymn would be necessary. The ideal condition would of course be some personal experience of the content, or at least repeated glimpses of the luminous consciousness that is behind each of the Vedic utterances. One positive sign that one is on the right track would surely be if the hymn on which one works starts to work on oneself. Any collective work or gathering in this context could be not so much a comparative mental analysis as a collective meditation and sharing of personal glimpses or insights.

In the first version of his article “The Gods of the Veda”: Sri Aurobindo writes:

The problem of Vedic interpretation depends in my view, on three different tests, philological, historic and psychological. If the result of these three coincide, then only can we be sure that we have understood the Veda.

(Archives & Research Vol.8, No.1)

And further below:

But even such a science [of philology, the modern word is linguistics], when completed, could not, owing to the paucity of our records be, by itself, a perfect guide. It would be necessary to discover, fix and take always into account the actual ideas, experiences and thought-atmosphere of the Vedic Rishis; for it is these things that give colour to the words of men and determine their use.

In the second version of the same article he writes:

…the real clue, the true principle by which the Veda can yet be made to render up its long-guarded secret. A Nirukta (etymology), based on a wider knowledge of the Aryan tongues than Dayananda possessed, more scientific than the conjectural philology of the Europeans is the first condition of the great discovery. The second is a sympathy and flexibility of intelligence capable of accepting passively and moulding itself to the mentality of the men of this remote epoch.

(A & R Vol.8, No.2)

After the more important questions of linguistics and of having at least a glimpse of the Vedic world, there still remains the question of how to present one’s translation. How much of the inner thought should come out in the translation itself, and how much of it would better go into a footnote or an attached commentary or even be prefixed as an introduction?
A detailed exposition with many samples as well as extensive quotations from Sri Aurobindo’s works was planned and to a large extent prepared. But it is not possible to present that in full in a publication like this. I hope that what I have written could serve as an introduction to my approach and effort at translating selected Vedic hymns, with the hope that they can be published in the near future. A sample was brought out by Savitri Bhavan in April 2007.

Here I would like to share some words by Sri Aurobindo about translating the Veda. In the ‘Foreword’ to ‘Hymns of the Atris’, he writes at page 352: (To the more interested reader I recommend reading from the very beginning of this chapter):

If the images preferred by the ancient sages had been such as the modern mind could easily grasp, if the symbols of the sacrifice were still familiar to us and the names of the Vedic gods still carried their old psychological significance, – as the Greek or Latin names of classical deities, Aphrodite or Ares, Venus or Minerva, still bear their sense for a cultured European, – the device of an interpretative translation could have been avoided. But India followed another curve of literary and religious development than the culture of the West. Other names of Gods have replaced the Vedic names or else these have remained but with only an external and diminished significance: the Vedic ritual, well-nigh obsolete, has lost its profound symbolic meaning; the pastoral, martial and rural images of the early Aryan poets sound remote, inappropriate, or, if natural and beautiful, yet void of the old deeper significance to the imagination of their descendants. Confronted with the stately hymns of the ancient dawn, we are conscious of a blank incomprehension. And we leave them as a prey to the ingenuity of the scholar who gropes for forced meanings amid obscurities and incongruities where the ancients bathed their souls in harmony and light.

*The Secret of the Veda*, CWSA 15:364

Then over almost four pages Sri Aurobindo shows first by a sample how the 19th century translators got lost because they had no knowledge even of the cultural mentality behind the phrases, and then gives many examples of how the real sense – always provided we understand it – can be brought out to our modern mentality only through an interpretive translation.

On his planned work of showing that the Veda first and foremost has a secret inner meaning he writes:

The hypothesis, if it proves to be valid, will have three advantages. It will elucidate simply and effectively the parts of the Upanishads that remain yet unintelligible or ill-understood, as well as much of the origin of the Puranas. It will explain and justify rationally the whole ancient tradition of India; for it will be found that, in sober truth, the Vedanta, Purana, Tantra, the philological schools and the great Indian religions do go back in their source to Vedic origins. We can see there in their original seed or in their early or even primitive forms the fundamental conception of later Indian thought. Thus a natural starting-point will be provided for a sounder study of Comparative Religion in the Indian field. Instead of wandering amid insecure speculations or having to account for impossible conversions and unexplained transitions we shall have a clue to a natural and progressive development satisfying to the reason.

*The Secret of the Veda*, CWSA 15:8

In this regard I would like to refer the interested reader to my version of the Anumati hymn, recently published by Savitri Bhavan, which translated in Sri Aurobindo’s light showed exactly such a seed form that must have naturally developed into later Indian teachings.

Sri Aurobindo continues:

Incidentally, some light may be thrown on the obscurities of early cult and myth in other ancient nations. Finally, the incoherencies of the Vedic texts will at once be explained and disappear. They exist in appearance only, because the real thread of the sense is to be found in an inner meaning. That thread found, the hymns appear as logical and organic wholes and the expression, though alien in type to our modern ways of thinking and speaking,
becomes, in its own style, just and precise
and sins rather by economy of phrase than
by excess, by over-pregnancy rather than by
poverty of sense. The Veda ceases to be merely
an interesting remnant of barbarism and takes
rank among the most important of the world’s
early Scriptures.

The Secret of the Veda, CWSA 15:9

It was exactly that inner thread and with it the luminous
consciousness behind the sometimes definitely archaic
expression which struck me more and more during
my work with the original text. And, significantly, the
grammar seems to follow much more the inner thread
than the outer garb. Almost from my first acquaintance
with these hymns I felt a connection with them and
the ‘Ancient Fathers’. And when I found out that in
most contemporary publications of selected hymns the
translators repeat meticulously and unquestioningly
all the misconceptions and speculations of 19th century
European scholarship as if they were bare facts, there
grew in me more and more the wish to help to put
these texts in their rightful place, as Sri Aurobindo
put it, “among the most important of the world’s early
Scriptures.” Such a recognition and understanding of
the Veda is even nowadays to a great extent wanting.
In the world of sacred literature it is most often
bypassed or only inadequate translations based on the
out-dated research prior to Sri Aurobindo are available
– a fact that must frustrate the interest of any spiritual
seeker the world over. This might also be the reason
why contemporary spiritual teachers in general do not
mention the Veda at all, but refer only to Buddhism,
Advaita Vedanta and Christianity.

I would like to add that my personal view about
translating the Veda has always been that it could be a
collective effort of a team of spiritual aspirants, who
share a common reverence and dedication to it, but who
come from different backgrounds. Not only linguists
but also poets, painters, musicians and dancers,
and anyone who is touched by it, could contribute.
Therefore I want to call out to the larger group-soul
with the proposal that, hopefully in the not too distant
future, there could be a weekly gathering or workshop
over a prolonged period of time (one year or more)
to translate the 63 verses of the ‘Hymn to the Earth’
from the Atharva-veda, with its very relevant message
to the larger contemporary world and to Auroville in
particular. I find this hymn, which like the Rig-veda is
full of many symbolic meanings, simply marvelous.
To my knowledge no such an undertaking has yet been
done in a way this ancient master-work deserves. The
outcome of these sessions could possibly be not only
a better and spiritually consistent translation to be
offered to the world at large, but also several multi-
artistic performances or exhibitions could happen
along with it. Maybe also children could be invited to
make some paintings on the many not only profound
but also beautiful images in which this truly holistic
hymn abounds.

I would like to end now with the last hymn of the
Rig-veda, as translated by Sri Aurobindo.

Rig-veda, Mandala 10, Sukta 191,
by Rishi Samvanana Angirasa

1. O Fire, O strong one, as master thou unitest us
with all things and art kindled high in the seat
of revelation; do thou bring to us the Riches.

2. Join together, speak one word, let your minds
arrive at one knowledge even as the ancient gods
arriving at one knowledge partake each of his
own portion.

3. Common Mantra have all these, a common
gathering to union, one mind common to all,
they are together in one knowledge; I pronounce
for you a common Mantra, I do sacrifice for you
with a common offering.

4. One and common be your aspiration, united your
hearts, common to you be your mind, – so that
close companionship may be yours.

Hymns to the Mystic Fire, SABCL 11:435-36
What is the origin of the different methods of writing,—from right to left, from left to right or, like the Chinese, vertically?

The question is one of great interest but impossible to solve definitely for lack of substantial data. All one can do is to speculate on the most probable and satisfying explanation.

In the first place, it is evident that these differences are no mere accident nor the result of some trivial and local cause; for they coincide with great cultural divisions of humanity belonging to prehistoric times. It is the races called Aryan from their common original culture whose script is directed from left to right; the Mesopotamian races deriving their culture from the Chaldeans proceed from right to left; the Mongolians write vertically.

In the second place no explanation is possible if we adopt the view that writing is a comparatively recent invention in the history of the human race and borrowed by all the ancient nations from a common source,—a derivation, let us say, from Egyptian hieroglyphs popularised and spread broadcast over earth by the commercial activities of Phoenician traders. We must suppose on the contrary that these differences were developed at a very early time while the great cultures were in their formation and before the dispersal of the races representing them.

Undoubtedly, the general use of writing is a late development in the history of the present cycle of civilisation. And to this retardation two causes contributed, at first, the absence of a simple and easy system and, afterwards, the absence of a simple, common, but handy and durable material. While this state of things endured, writing would not be used for daily and ordinary purposes, but only in connection with great religious ceremonies or, where culture was materially more advanced, for the preservation of important records or of treasured and sacred knowledge.

It is, therefore, in some circumstance intimately connected with religious ideas and practices that we must look for the explanation we are seeking; and it should be a circumstance common to all these cultures, yet capable of leading to so striking a difference.

The one important circumstance common, one might almost say central, to the ideas and practices of the ancient nations was the reverence for the sun and its supreme importance in religious ceremonies. Might not the direction adopted for their writing be determined by some difference in their attitude towards the direction of the sun in its daily movement from east to west?
The difference of attitude can only be explained if we suppose that for some reason the Aryan forefathers had their faces turned southwards, the Mesopotamian northwards and the Mongolian eastwards. In that case, the sun for the Aryans would move from their left to their right, for the Mesopotamians from their right to their left, for the Mongolians straight towards them, and this difference would be represented by the movement of the hand tracing the sacred symbols on some hard flat surface, of stone or other material used for these early scripts.

But what circumstance, again, could lead to this difference? We can only think of one,—that this tendency might have been formed during the constant migration of these races from their original habitat. If we accept Mr. Tilak’s theory of an Aryan migration from the arctic regions southwards towards India, Persia and the Mediterranean countries; if we can suppose that the fathers of the Mesopotamian culture came from the south northwards and that the first Mongolian movement was from Central Asia to the east, we shall have the necessary conditions. We may thus explain also the Sanskrit terms for the four directions; for entering India from the west and following this line in their early colonisation, the east would be in front of the Aryans, purva, the west behind, pascima, the south on their right, daksina, while the name for the north, uttara, higher, might possibly indicate a memory of their old northern home in that supreme point of the earth where they still placed the sacred mountain of their gods.

Necessarily, this explanation is in the highest degree conjectural and depends on pure intellectual reasoning which is an unsafe guide in the absence of solid and sufficient data. Nevertheless, it is the one positive explanation that suggests itself to us and, as a hypothesis, is well worth taking into consideration.

CWSA 13:448-50