The inauguration of Auroville on 28 February 1968. During the ceremony, people from over 50 countries threw handfuls of soil from their own homelands into a lotus-shaped urn containing the city’s charter.

Auroville, the fulfilment

by Lotfallah Soliman

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The illustrations on pages 48 and 49 and on the back cover are by the French photographer Dominique Darr.

On a February day in 1968, some 5,000 people from many countries gathered on a remote plateau in south India for the inauguration of Auroville. In a gesture of unity, young people from each delegation placed a handful of earth from their country in an inaugural urn containing the charter of the new city.

Auroville takes its name from the Indian mystic and philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) whose works and ideas inspired its creation. Also known as “the city of dawn” and “the city the Earth needs”, it is this year celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of its foundation.

Its story actually begins much earlier, with the meeting shortly before the First World War between Sri Aurobindo and Mira Alfassa, an artist and visionary from France. Together they worked in India for “a new creation, beginning with a model town and ending with a perfect world”. After the philosopher’s death in 1950, Mira Alfassa, who had become known as “the Mother”, continued the realization of the dream she shared with Sri Aurobindo.

THE DREAM

“There should be somewhere on Earth a place which no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings of goodwill
who have a sincere aspiration could live freely as citizens of the world and obey one single authority, that of the supreme truth; a place of peace, concord and harmony, where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his sufferings and miseries, to surmount his weaknesses and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and concern for progress would take precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the search for pleasure and material enjoyment.

"In this place, children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their souls; education would be given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts but to enrich existing faculties and bring forth new ones. In this place, titles and positions would be replaced by opportunities to serve and organize; the bodily needs of everyone would be equally provided for, and intellectual, moral and spiritual superiority would be expressed in the general organization not by an increase in the pleasures and powers of life but by increased duties and responsibilities. Beauty in all its artistic forms, painting, sculpture, music, literature, would be equally accessible to all; the ability to share in the joy it brings would be limited only by the capacities of each one and not by social and financial position.

"For in this ideal place money would no longer be the sovereign lord; individual worth would have a far greater importance than that of material wealth and social standing. There, work would not be a way of earning one’s living but a means of expressing oneself and of developing one’s capacities and possibilities while being of service to the community as a whole, which, for its own part, would provide for each individual’s subsistence and sphere of action.

"In short, it would be a place where...
human relationships, which are normally based almost exclusively on competition and strife, would be replaced by relationships of emulation in doing well, of collaboration and real brotherhood."

The Mother wrote these words in 1954. Construction plans began to take shape in the early 1960s, and in 1965 the Mother issued her first public message in which she stated that "Auroville wants to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realize human unity."

The site chosen for Auroville is a dozen kilometres northeast of Pondicherry and five kilometres from the sea. It is located on the Coromandel coastal plain and extends over an area of some 20 square kilometres. At the outset the site was nothing more than a bare wasteland. One of the first Aurovillians, Alan Lithman, remembers: "A merciless Sun beat down upon this wretched piece of earth, bleaching it bone white or a brittle terracotta. A once-living earth was dying. We reached the edge of a canyon whose fingers gouged through the landscape. My friend pointed across the ravine to the barren plateau beyond, where a few palmyra trees shimmered like phantoms in the heat waves. 'There it is,' he said. 'Auroville'. I looked and saw nothing but a vacant landscape that slid into the Bay of Bengal. How could I possibly live here? How could anyone?'"

Thanks to years of hard work, this place where 700 people from some twenty-five countries now live permanently slowly began to come to life again. "Looking back across the threshold of that canyon I crossed twenty years ago," says Alan Lithman, "I see . . . forests and grasslands filled with flowers and the birds and other wildlife that had disappeared. I see what can be done with hardly any means or resources and under the most impossible conditions . . . I see what can be done by the power of simply doing it. And as I turn toward the starkly contrasting landscape behind me, I see all that is yet to be done."

But no one person can claim the credit for this "miracle". It was possible simply because of people working together—the illiterate villager and the university professor, the scientist and the housewife, and all those who have volunteered to take part in this adventure. The local people contribute in many ways. Through its Village Action network, Auroville is involved in programmes for "co-evolution".

**THE IDEAL OF ‘UNENDING EDUCATION’**

Meenakshi, an award-winning Tamil poet, lives in Auroville and helps in co-ordinating village relations and educational and cultural programmes. "Many of the Indian residents of Auroville are young Tamils who have come because of contacts through work, sports or school," he says. Meenakshi feels that for them Auroville represents a "new order, a freedom to learn and become and when compared to the social oppression of the villages."

The ideal of "unending education" is actively pursued. Deptl, from the Punjab, is a teacher at the "Last School" who has been involved in bringing some of India's finest artists to perform at Auroville. "They all identify with the inner reality of Auroville and respond positively to the atmosphere of freedom and beauty that exists here," she says. "I have discovered a deeper Indianess since coming to Auroville, as the process of finding oneself here sometimes accentuates one's national characteristics before one goes beyond them. Finally you become an Aurovillian, and Auroville is an inner pursuit that has nothing to do with an external personality. It is a pursuit of the soul and the soul knows no nationality. I believe it is the destiny of Auroville and India to be linked." She recalls a remark once made in the Indian Parliament to the effect that Auroville is "an arrow shot into the future".

In 1969, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, warmly greeted the creation of Auroville, and during its session of October-November 1970. UNESCO's General Conference noted that Auroville was preparing to become "an instrument of education capable of meeting the formidable demands of our age, linking East and West in a new relationship."

After the Mother's death in 1973, Auroville went through a critical period. The participants in this "laboratory" of humanity had to develop the inner strength to make Auroville work. In 1980, a decision of the Supreme Court of India enabled the residents of Auroville to continue working unimpeded on behalf of their ideals. An Act of Parliament voted in 1988 created an Auroville Foundation with an international advisory council to ensure that the ideals of Auroville are safeguarded.

During the 1980s, institutes for educational and scientific research were established, and afforestation and erosion control programmes continued. Advances in the design and manufacture of renewable energy systems, notably windmills and biogas systems, have proved successful. There has been intense activity in the provision of cost-effective housing, where there
has been progress in the use and production of stabilized earth block technology.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the work accomplished over the previous twenty years can be clearly seen, with some of the infrastructure and many community services in place and the giant sphere of the Matrimandir, the "soul" of Auroville, nearing completion. Viewed from the outside, this "Dwelling Place of the Mother" (the meaning of "Matrimandir" in Sanskrit) or "Pavilion of Divine Love" is a flattened sphere 36 metres in diameter. Two spiral steel ramps give access to the immense circular inner chamber, measuring 24 metres in diameter by 16 metres in height, with its twelve white marble-clad wall panels and rhythmically-spaced columns topped by a conical roof. At floor level, right in the middle of this meditation chamber, a fine crystal globe picks up the reflection of the Sun's rays funnelled down from a tracker heliostat on the roof of the Matrimandir. A lake and twelve flower gardens will be created around the Matrimandir.

Is it a religion? When she described her vision of the Matrimandir in 1970, the Mother firmly insisted that it was not. There would be "A fixed day or time for the visitors," she added, "and the rest of the time only for those who are serious, serious and sincere, who want to learn to concentrate. No fixed meditations, but they should stay there in silence, in silence and concentration. A place for trying to find one's consciousness."

In a tormented world...