

# Foundations, Principles and Inspirational Resources of **Integral Politics**



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## 1. Sri Aurobindo: Integral Yoga and the Vision of Human Unity

This book has been compiled and written during the Strategic Partnership Leadership for Transition (LiFT 3.0) *Politics*, 2019-2022, Intellectual Output N° 1

Published online August 31, 2022



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

## Chapter 1

### Sri Aurobindo: Integral Yoga and the Vision of Human Unity

At the beginning of integral politics as understood and described in this book, we have to acknowledge a powerful vision that is grounded in both a deep and embodied spiritual and political practice. Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), the founder of “Integral Yoga”, was a mystic philosopher and at the same time an “integral politician” *avant la lettre*.



Born in India and raised mostly in England, he combined Eastern spirituality with a high-level western education. When coming back to India in his early adulthood, he soon became a leading figure in the Indian national independence movement, struggling to overcome British rule. During a period of imprisonment in result of his political activism, he started to engage with a yoga practice on his own, based on the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. During the following years, he began to develop his own idea of an evolutionary, transformative practice, which he called “**integral Yoga**”. So let’s first take a moment to dive deeper into Aurobindo’s philosophy.

#### Summary Box: Key concepts, claims and elements

- \* **Spirituality:** Inspiration is ultimately drawn from a focus on the Divine as the ultimate goal of being
- \* Integral Yoga as a **holistic practice:** connecting inner and outer realms, vision and realism, ground and embody all striving for a better world
- \* **Development of self and world:** all life is a process of unfolding of higher potentials (combining man’s striving towards the Divine with the Divine’s descent into the world), no step can be skipped
- \* **World-centric perspective** (humanity united as a political vision)
- \* **Integral anthropology:** body, vital/emotions, mind and spirit/supermind need to be integrated and balanced for a healthy existence
- \* Political institutions designed to organize human unity (on various levels) must be based on corresponding **inner qualities** (“psychic unity”); inner/psychic (soul) dimensions tend to be the driving force (precondition for institutions to function well; “an order is only healthy if it comes from within”).
- \* There is a **natural dynamic** in favor of unfolding, development and growth that cannot be acted against in the long run; all development processes are fundamentally path-dependent, i.e. follow their own natural logic and inherent dynamics. ☐ There will and should always be a coexistence of unity and variation to allow all entities to develop at their own speed.
- \* Politics needs to acknowledge, respect and ideally support the different needs for growth and provide **enabling environments** for development at all levels.
- \* **Holonic concept of politics:** individual and collective life needs to be healthy and balanced at all levels; collective life feels more comfortable when it can concentrate in small spaces; those need to be “healthy” in order to join together to build larger entities.

### *A short dive into Aurobindo's philosophy*

*"To grow into the truth and power of the spirit, and by the direct action of that power to become a right streambed through which that can express itself, a life of man in God and a divine life of spirit in humanity. This, therefore, is the principle and the whole **aim of an integral yoga** of self-perfection." (Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 1990).*

Much could be said about Aurobindo's integral philosophy and yoga. For our purpose here, we will limit our focus to those aspects which, in hindsight, appear to have been major influences on later integral thinking and have thus in some sense contributed to pave the way to our current understanding of integral politics.

Like Ken Wilber later on, whose work is greatly indebted to Aurobindo, the latter was a powerful bridge builder between eastern spiritual traditions and western science and philosophy. After his withdrawal from politics in connection with ongoing spiritual experiences and realizations, he turned more and more towards the subject of consciousness. From 1926 on, Aurobindo Ghose started to be called Sri Aurobindo by his growing number of followers, who gathered around the newly founded Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry (today Puducherry).

Among the specific traits of Aurobindo's philosophy are his focus on consciousness development and his quite **pragmatic, hands-on approach** in this regard. He saw the development of humanity as an ongoing process, similar to that of the cosmos as a whole. From his spiritual perspective, he interpreted the latter's continuous expansion as a **process of unfolding** of forces and potentials inherent in the true essence of that which develops and, at the same time, as a gradual manifestation of Brahman, the ultimate, unchanging, eternal reality (or consciousness) in space and time.

Man, in turn, can gradually wake up and become conscious of this process of unfolding. Hence, he can become more and more aware of being part of a divine consciousness himself, manifesting itself in multiple ways and forms. On this basis then, s/he can become a co-creator of evolution and development in all areas of life. For according to Aurobindo, it is not enough for the soul to ascend and unite with the Divine, or for the spirit to be absorbed in Nirvana. Rather than seeing an ascent to the Divine alone as the core goal, he urges that a **descent of the Divine into the world** must follow.

Aurobindo's **Integral Yoga** is, in essence, a spiritual practice, striving to completely devote all actions, words and thoughts to this process of unfolding of the Divine. Therefore, it is clearly not just a collection of asanas, but rather a holistic endeavor, engaging the whole body-mind-soul system (hence his famous quote "**All life is yoga**"). At the same time, it is pragmatic, because it holds that for the world to be transformed, no steps of the path can be skipped. Only those who walk the steps of the **entire ladder**, that is, who consciously turn all parts of their personality towards the Divine, can also return to the path and bring the Divine into the world. In turn, while individual practice is a precondition for progressing on the developmental path, ultimately only surrendering to the divine itself can bring about the transformation.

In this context, Aurobindo's terms of the **mind** and the **supermind** and his model of the **layers of the human being** are important. The latter spells out four dimensions of being which have later been picked up by the Swiss Integral Politics group as a basis for their integral anthropology (see <https://integrale-politik.ch/unsere-vision/>, in German):

- The physical (true physis = the original evolutionary power, Annamaya Purusha)

- Vital (Pranamya Purusha)
- Mental (higher mental levels; Manomaya Purusha)
- The central essence (Antaratman, [Jivatman](#), eternal Self, psychic being)

As to the former, supermind is understood as an intermediary power between the unmanifested Brahman and the manifested world (Aurobindo, 1990: 132-133). Aurobindo argues that the supermind can be realized within ourselves as it is always already present within mind as a potentiality within itself (ibid, 134). It is through the supramental that mind, life and body can be spiritually transformed towards those higher potentials.

Aurobindo's yoga is called "**integral**" for several reasons. First, because it involves both **inner and outer dimensions** and bridges the divine with a **transformative work** in the world, seeking to permeate it with the divine. Second, because it integrates various existing and more traditional streams and disciplines of yoga such as jnana, karma and bhakti yoga (as described in his Synthesis of Yoga).

This focus on integrating spiritual development and the transformation of the manifest world shows that Aurobindo's yoga has powerful **political consequences**.

In fact, Aurobindo has himself formulated his **political vision** in a separate book called "The ideal of human unity" (1918), which we will turn to now as the main inspiration for this chapter.<sup>1</sup>

### *Aurobindo on integral (world) politics*

Aurobindo's political vision has been developed after the end of World War I – which probably had a substantial effect on him. At the same time, "The ideal of human unity" (1918) is also a testimony of its time when it comes to terminology, core concepts and some of his general comments on contemporary world politics. However, we still hold this vision to be worthwhile and sufficiently powerful to be presented here as a first inspiration and reference point of our notion of integral politics. Without being able to do justice to the work as a whole, we will highlight a number of ideas that continue to appear relevant and significant for our time as well.

### *Aurobindo's overall vision summarized*

In a nutshell, Aurobindo's overall vision of "human unity" revolves around "some kind of world union" that has as its goal and purpose to offer a **better, richer, happier and more powerful individual and collective life** to all members of the human species. It would give them the freedom to grow and to be completely oneself, enabling everyone to unfold their full human potential in harmony with the flow of universal energy (Aurobindo, 1973: 96, 114).

The philosophical and spiritual "subtext" of this overall vision is Aurobindo's conviction that the deeper meaning of human existence is for each person "to unfold and express the Divine Being in themselves in their own special way", which he sees as "the true goal of human existence, once the material subsistence is secured (ibid.: 308). In this sense, he speaks of the human condition as "God in the process of growth" (ibid.: 23).

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this chapter was first written in German. Therefore, all quotations from Aurobindo's work are my translations of the German edition of "Ideal of Human Unity" (1973).

More practically, Aurobindo sees the “ideal solution” for scaffolding these endeavors in a free grouping and proposes as its **most desirable shape** “a federation of free nations in which all oppression (...) of one under the other has disappeared”. He describes it as a federal “empire (...) composed of heterogeneous peoples and cultures” who all have the same status while at the same time being able to express their **natural and psychic unity** (ibid.: 13 and 360). “A free world union must by its nature be a complex union based on (...) living diversity” (ibid.: 301), he writes. It must rest on free self-determination and take account of natural and historical divisions. Consequently, this “free, elastic, progressive world union” cannot be built on any kind of force or coercion (ibid.: 281), but depends on explicit consent and on the possibility for its member entities to leave it at any time.

At the center of the challenge to build a social organism around these goals, then, is the permanent **tension between individual (entities) and (global) community** (ibid.: 21). Aurobindo's "ideal of becoming one" does not mean "that one is swallowed up by the other, but that each advances through the other towards the highest ideal of love" (ibid.: 22), through the continuous practice of being together and growing mutual understanding.

Interestingly, Aurobindo holds this organization of humanity to be “necessary and inevitable” in the sense of a natural **evolutionary tendency** towards more comprehensive organizations (ibid.: 14). Moreover, he sees the unification of humanity as part of the “plan of nature” that sooner or later is bound to happen: “Nature has as its unconditional goal: the perfection of the individual in a perfected society” (ibid.: 19).

In the next paragraphs, we will unpack Aurobindo’s vision in more detail, focusing on a couple of elements and dimensions that continue to be relevant for integral politics today.

### *The inner dimension (psychic unity) as the driving force*

To begin with, Aurobindo could not put more emphasis onto the statement that unity needs to start within. In Wilberian terms (see chapter 4 below), we would say that developments in the Lower Left quadrant (culture) needs to precede those in the Lower Right one (structures and institutions). Put simply, he sees the latter as the servant of the former...

For “in order to prevent an organism from decaying and dying, there must be a strong psychic force working in it, which, in spite of all the changes in its embodiment, asserts itself and survives them”, says Aurobindo (ibid.: 324).

Not surprisingly, Aurobindo understands this psychic force to be more than just a desire or will arising from the ego (“the ego is not of itself and is not immortal”). Rather, he associates it with the ideas of **truth, wisdom and health**. It takes wisdom, he says, to recognize the “truth of life” and the real needs of humanity” (ibid.: 85), and, on this basis, to create a resilient system of organization whose “true ordering principle should replace the artificial systems of organization” (ibid.).

This, he emphasizes, is not necessarily identical with “what the system of logical reason [or the ego, E.F.] finds satisfactory”. Rather, “man should live from his soul, not from the ego” (ibid.: 324ff). The search for the best organizational system for a united humanity thus presupposes a **process of inner, soul development and maturation**, although this is not described in more detail in this book. The

latter is more about (external, political) freedom as a basic condition for the individual to find his or her own self and thus, his or her individuality (ibid.: 269).

Elsewhere, Aurobindo nevertheless writes that humanity must "search more wisely, more fully and more patiently for its true law and purpose", and that it must "strive for deep, assured and comprehensive knowledge" as (and about) the basis of life, vitality and health (ibid.: 12).

According to Aurobindo, **"an order is only healthy if it comes from within"** (ibid.: 269), that is, if the inner transformation precedes the outer transformation (ibid.: 13). In view of the vision of a unification of humanity, this means that the latter should be "a completely healthy one", in other words, "conform to the deepest laws of life". To this end, as already indicated, it must be "founded on free groupings, (and) these must be natural associations of free individuals. (ibid.: 269f.)

And as he stresses once again, a federation such as the one that Aurobindo advocates "has hitherto proved a successful principle of organization only between states, nations or sub-nations which were already **inwardly inclined to unite through the bonds of common culture, common past or an already developed sense of common national affinity**" (ibid.: 295). Considering the subtle relations between those inner qualities and the outer organizational forms, he notes that "for humanity, there is no area that is less transparent and intellectually mastered than our own communal and collective life" (ibid.: 11).

In view of today's supranational unification processes, such as those in the context of the EU, this sentence seems quite topical.

*Individual and collective development as corner stones and drivers of human unity,  
in service of a better, richer, happier life*

Given his attention for the inner qualities described above, it is not surprising that Aurobindo puts a strong focus on the development of the individual and of society as a whole, as well as on the development of its forms of organization. What will be spelled out in more detail by several thinkers presented in the following chapters is thus already present in Aurobindo's work.

As already mentioned, he sees the development of one's own personal potential as an important, if not the central purpose of existence. Aurobindo assumes that everything in the personal as well as in the supra-personal-social sphere develops or can develop in an evolutionary way, and with a natural necessity, in the direction of higher complexity. Thus he writes:

"Nature has as its unconditional goal: the perfection of the individual in a perfected society and finally in a perfect humanity – whereby we always understand 'perfection' in a relative and progressive sense." (ibid.: 19).

Thus, "evolution moves forward from simple oneness to complex oneness by means of multiformity" (ibid.: 269). Furthermore, note that in Aurobindo's perspective, "the progress of nature takes place in stages" (ibid.: 17). He justifies this as follows: "Nature had to form these (...) stages of human culture, because the resistances of space, the organizational difficulties, as well as the limitations of the human heart and brain, require that small groupings be formed first, then larger and larger ones. Thus, man can be gradually trained by progressive expansion until he is prepared for the final, universal attitude" (ibid.: 17).



Even though Aurobindo does not refer to a concrete model in this context, he already gives some examples of how the development he is describing affects the social realm. For example, he holds that at the early stages of development there is still no law (which is a product of the mental world), but rather, at best, customary law; "strong men" are only later replaced by legislative authorities.

At the same time, he emphasizes the permanent tension between the individual and society and the need to bring both into a productive, mutually supportive relationship: "The whole process of nature is based on the principle of balance and on a constant tendency towards harmony between the two poles of life: the individual and the totality. (...) Perfect is only that society which supports the perfection of the individual personality to the largest degree" (ibid.: 17).

### *Realistic concept of politics and human nature*

While Aurobindo's belief in the capacity of man and society to evolve, whereby "something deeper, inner, real is to come to fruition" (ibid.: 35), can be described as thoroughly idealistic, even visionary, his vision at the same time demonstrates a great degree of realism. Sometimes it is precisely the mixture of realism and visionary quality that makes his ideas so fascinating. Let us therefore look at both more closely.

In some respects, Aurobindo's emphasis on the energy of the individual striving for development as being the "actually effective factor(s) for collective progress" (ibid.: 29) appears to be a very liberal position. In line with liberal thinking, he also takes a rather critical view of the state as "only an expedient structure with rather crude institutions that has to serve our common development" (ibid.: 33). The latter is indeed able to "remove obstacles and resistances" that stand in the way of the development of the community. But at the same time, it is "incapable of that free, harmonious and intelligently or instinctively varied activity that is peculiar to organic growth. For the state is not an organism" but "a mechanism and works like a machine, without tact, delicacy or intuition. It tries to fabricate. Humanity, however, exists to grow and to create" (ibid.).

Thus, while the task of the state, according to Aurobindo, is to "grant all possible facilitation for co-operation" (ibid.: 34), he describes its instinct as a tendency to persist (ibid.: 35). For the time being, he says, it functions merely as a body for settling conflicts (ibid.: 360), which are always possible because "vital (instinct-driven) man always remains in the majority" (ibid.: 310ff.).

Moreover, he seems to hold a fundamental **skepticism towards the state** form of organization: "The possession of power is the supreme test of every idealism. And so far, no one has escaped the degeneration of corruption" (ibid.: 231). – This can be seen as another sign of Aurobindo's realism in the political realm. Dangers like these, arising from certain vital human urges, must be kept in mind, and precautions must be taken against them, he warns (ibid.: 356).

For this reason, Aurobindo also considers it "unlikely that the unification of humanity will come about through a state mechanism" (ibid.: 35). Rather, he sees its driving force in the democratic nation as the natural expression of freely uniting groups of people who strive to live independently. Similarly, he speaks of the "natural tendency of distinct groups of people (...) to form an independent type of nation" (ibid.: 66).

From this he concludes: "It looks as if the future of humanity lies in the hands of the self-governing, free nation" (ibid.: 83). For Aurobindo sees the latter as a kind of training ground in service of personal and collective development. It is in it that people are most likely to come closer to each other empathically, and that they learn to recognize each other as fellow human beings and to be "spiritually one with each other" (ibid.: 170) – an important interpersonal practice, as it were, on the way to a "wisdom and foresight" that ultimately overcomes egoism (ibid.: 128). Therefore, "the unity of humanity must occur through the nation (...) as long as the spirit has not yet been radically transformed" (ibid.: 85).

Against this background, supranational unity is only a next step in the progressive unification of humanity, with all the challenges that this entails (ibid.: 71).

So while Aurobindo sees the nation as a natural organism, and, as it were, as a spiritual training ground appropriate to the present state of human development, his visionary gaze is already directed towards an "intelligent organization" that can one day replace the nation – presupposing a corresponding inner, spiritual development.

### *Respecting natural dynamics and principles of being and development*

From today's perspective, Aurobindo's strong reference to nature as the shaping principle and driving force of all development seems quite massive. We are hardly used to submitting ourselves so unconditionally to the forces of nature anymore – and vice versa, to assume a quasi-teleological development. Nevertheless, his perspective offers valuable suggestions for integral politics today.

Let us start with Aurobindo's strongest claim: "**It is nature alone that acts**" (ibid.: 163) – from which follows that it is futile to resist it or its basic impulses and principles. For in the end, "the intention of nature will probably overcome the obstacles" (ibid.: 349f.). To do this, "the urging of nature creates its own means" (ibid.: 321).

Similar to the liberal political and natural law philosophers of the Enlightenment, Aurobindo describes freedom against this background as "the privilege of obeying the law of our being (ibid.: 169ff.), i.e. of actively submitting to the inevitable, as it were. Here, the concept of truth also comes into play: "The deep, comprehensive truth of nature should be our guide" (ibid.: 27). It is therefore a matter of an "alignment" with nature or, in other words, since we ourselves are part of nature, with our own core of being and its natural needs and innermost drives.

So what is this ultimately inevitable thing willed by nature? Here, too, Aurobindo expresses himself with a clarity that is unusual from today's point of view: "Nature makes progress, it rises from step to step. (...) This is the true nature of our being." (ibid.: 159) It is therefore necessary, as it were, to recognize and realize "the natural law in our progress" (Chapter 17) – and above all not to act against it.

"**Progress**" here specifically means one's own development, individually as well as collectively and communally. While on the one hand, this implies an increasing unfolding of our hidden potentials at all of these levels, as already described above, nature's urge to develop, on the other hand, is directed towards the creation of "ever greater unions" (ibid.: 360). In this regard, according to Aurobindo, conflicts and upheavals can only delay the course of events, but not stop it (ibid.: 361). At the end of



this development, driven by the "evolutionary urge of that world energy", he sees the world-state, from which no one is excluded (ibid.: 349f).

Even more concretely, he emphasizes the **coexistence and simultaneity of unity and variation** (ibid.: 168ff) – a principle that seems very topical against the background of critical and centrifugal tendencies in the EU today. "Real spiritual and psychic unity", according to Aurobindo, "can allow free diversity". Yet "this unity of life allows for and promotes an infinite variety of different types" (ibid.: 168). Thus, it is the principle of life itself to "freely vary uniform principles and apply them in subtly diverse ways" (ibid.: 189).

So how does this natural progress take place? What are its underlying laws and principles that so invariably impose themselves on human life and striving?

If teleology was mentioned earlier, this is by no means Aurobindo's concept. Rather, his plea for diversity also refers to HOW development and progress take place. He does not understand them as uniform, linear processes, notwithstanding the assumed general tendency towards unfolding and towards greater unions: "**Our progress has not taken place as a straight-line development**", but in cycles, with setbacks and beyond simple linearity, he reminds us (ibid.: 24). Humanity, says Aurobindo, has "developed a habit of surviving the worst catastrophes... and this must be so if humanity's existence is to have meaning" (ibid.: 351).

So while **all development processes are fundamentally path-dependent** (in today's terminology) – i.e. co-determined by multiple contextual conditions – a powerful general, natural attractor towards more unfolding and (re)integration at more complex levels can be identified. This basic postulate will later be spelled out further by numerous developmental models (see the following chapters on Gebser and Wilber).

For Aurobindo, two things follow from all this: on the one hand, the world state in the sense of a spiritual-psychological growing together of humanity as described above – as unfamiliar as the term may sound to today's ears – is "the only logical, inevitable final result" of socio-political evolution (ibid.: 351). On the other hand, of course, we must not inhibit "life precisely at its most important sources of strength, in its rich abundance and natural self-development" (ibid.: 169), for example by trying too hard to plan, control or centralize development or processes of unification. "**One size fits all**" is **not the guiding principle of integral politics**. This leads us to the last core element in Aurobindo's vision.

### *Holonic self-organization and self-actuation*

"Collective life obviously loses intensity and creative power when it spreads over too wide a space" (ibid.: 15) – this is the central justification for Aurobindo's plea in favor of observing the "right measure" in the external organization of public life. It is the intensity and creative power of inner values and qualities (both individual and communal) that external forms of organization must serve. In other words: no state form or structure is an end in itself, not even the ultimately desired world state, as long as on the micro level of coexistence inside it, life is not based on healthy communities.

Rather, "**collective life feels more comfortable when it can concentrate in small spaces and in simple organisms**" (ibid.: 13), he claims. Or, to put it another way: every unit has an optimal size that

allows it to develop and to thrive in the best possible way. Hence, finding or sensing this optimal size is a central task of wise politics.

In this regard, Aurobindo refers to the "age when humanity could organize itself in small, independent centers that directly interacted intimately with each other but did not fuse into a single entity" (ibid.: 14).

In this way, his ideas are strongly reminiscent of the concept of the **holon** developed a little later by Arthur Koestler, which has been taken up extensively in Ken Wilber's integral model. It describes a unit that is both whole in itself and part of a larger unit. The basic principle here is that the "needs and interests of the smaller units are aligned with the growth of that larger whole which is to unite them all" (ibid.: 18). In any case, their union creates a mutual added value (win-win) without the smaller units having to give up their independent life and existence.

For Aurobindo, the nation is the most natural unit and thus the foundation of social life. One reason for this has already been mentioned: the inner, essential or cultural-linguistic closeness of the members of a nation to each other, which ensures deeper and more intensive exchange relations than can be expected from supranational units. Moreover, he sees the nation as the guarantor of a "democratic and therefore peaceful spirit" (ibid.: 231).

Nations, so much is certain for Aurobindo, should have the right to determine their own destiny, even if they belong to larger entities (ibid.: 231). "Never should nations put up with serious interference by the world state in these matters" (ibid.: 255; i.e. the choice of their own political system and social life, their own ideals and inclinations and their own way of being free in a healthy and natural way, EF).

Irrespective of this, the long-term task is nevertheless to **follow the natural evolutionary impulse to create ever more refined forms of organization** that are able to take account of the principles described above and for supporting and increasing creative potential at all levels, rather than inhibiting or confining it. In this context, Sri Aurobindo sees the continued existence of nations as a necessary condition not only for better coordinating the desired unified life of humanity, but also in the interest of the "joy of one's own being" (ibid.: 249).

So much for my tentative summary and interpretation of some of Aurobindo's central ideas on politics. As emphasized at the beginning, this is by no means a comprehensive evaluation of his work, but merely a selective reading of his main political vision, given the existing limitations of time, space and resources. The central question of my reading was which suggestions an integral politics today can draw from this and which red threads can be condensed into core principles of a new, integral paradigm of politics, considering that Aurobindo was the single most important mastermind that all subsequent integral and likeminded approaches are drawing on in one way or another.

These core principles are summarized in the Summary Box above.

However, before moving over to the next thinker, Jean Gebser, let us take a brief look at what emerged as one visible manifestation and impact of Aurobindo's philosophy and political thinking after his death, namely the Auroville experiment.

### *Auroville – an integral political city and community*

The **Auroville** community has been built up essentially by Aurobindo's spiritual partner, Mirra Alfassa ("The Mother"). Preparations for it started in 1954, and it was officially founded in February 1968. Auroville has since then continuously grown and is today one of the largest spiritual communities on the globe (for more info see <https://auroville.org/contents/197>).

In the following paragraphs, we will briefly look at the vision behind the Auroville project and at some of the challenges it has been facing over the last years.

#### *Auroville – the vision and dream*

The Mother, Mirra Alfassa, has described her dream for Auroville as a new kind of society based on the principles of justice, harmony and a dynamic balance between all involved concerns and interests as follows:

##### ***Auroville's core principles:***

*"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 the concern for progress would take precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the search for pleasure and material enjoyment."*

(The Mother, <https://auroville.org/contents/197>)

Furthermore, she stresses the importance

- for everyone, especially **children** "to grow and **develop integrally** without losing contact with their souls", and to develop one's capacities to be of service to the community as a whole
- for all kinds of arts to express beauty and joy and make them accessible to all
- for **individual worth** to outweigh money, material wealth and social standing
- for human relationships to be based on collaboration and real brotherhood **instead of** competition and strife

The full "dream" statement is available on the Auroville website.

Note that at the time, The Mother conceded that "the earth is certainly not ready to realize such an ideal, for mankind does not yet possess the necessary knowledge to understand and accept it, nor the indispensable conscious force to execute it. That is why I call it **a dream**."

Yet, she clearly saw her dream as being “on the way of becoming a reality”, precisely by building up Auroville as a **“small scale”** version of the bigger dream, “in proportion to our modest means”, and with the aim to progressively “advance, little by little, towards our goal (...) to be born into a **more true, more harmonious new life**” (ibid.).

As to Auroville’s formal statutes, its charter is kept surprisingly simple and contains only four principles:

#### **The Auroville Charter**

1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But, to live in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.
2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.
3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realizations.
4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity.

Starting from this vision, let us now take a brief look at the actual development of the Auroville project over the past decades. To what extent have the residents been able to practically implement some of Aurobindo's ideas on integral politics?

#### *The materialization of the vision*

The laboratory for the development of new forms of coexistence based on Aurobindo's integral yoga, his philosophy of consciousness development and peaceful intercultural coexistence was built on a 15 square kilometer desert plateau ten kilometers north of the South Indian city of Pondicherry (Puducherry). Accordingly, the new international city of humanity first had to be literally wrested from the barren soil which the pioneers nevertheless succeeded in doing an impressive manner. In fact, the first generation of settlers "gradually (...) achieved a resettlement of the original evergreen dry tropical forest" (Kunze, 2009: 72) and thus became a model in demand worldwide.

Besides the claim of a sustainable, ecological way of life, Auroville also achieved some success in integrating the six surrounding Tamil villages into its economic and ecosystem.

Of course, both areas have always been the subject of conflicts. For example, the preservation of the tropical forest has been in conflict with ideas for inviting around 50,000 settlers to inhabit the place, which according to a master plan should take place in the form of a galaxy around an empty center designed as a peace zone. This would probably require sacrificing some forest again. Currently, however, there are only about 2,000 inhabitants living in Auroville, so that the claim of an ecological development project continues to exist for the time being (ibid.: 74).

Also, the challenge of integrating the surrounding villages (and the expanding city of Pondicherry) reveals tensions between the lack of land and housing on the one hand, and the need to avoid re-densification on the other (ibid.: 73).

The "flexible Indian building law", as Kunze puts it, provides the context for the fact that Auroville today resembles less a city than a "jungle of earth roads", with around 120 settlements scattered across the site and a "wide variety of living situations, from individual huts and houses to communal and neighborhood living", each involving from a few to 100 people (Kunze 2009: 74).

### *Characteristics of an integral political project*

With regard to Auroville's role as a model of an integral city, its continuing character as a "pioneer and construction site" (ibid.: 74) should be emphasized. Apart from the above mentioned context conditions of Indian building law, this character also arises, on the one hand, from the explicit, self-imposed goal of getting by largely without fixed rules and laws.

Furthermore, the purpose of Auroville also calls for avoiding too strict structures and modes of organization: At the center is its **intention**, the spiritual connection of the members, the ideal space in which an integral community can emerge as a container for individual and collective development (ibid.: 75). Therefore, the aim is not so much to implement specific structures or ways of life; rather, the focus is on this intention itself and its implementation in practice (ibid.: 77). This in turn requires more attention on communication and community building processes, and conversely, more flexible structures that can respond to the respective needs of the moment.

Moreover, such a **focus on intention or purpose** seems to be a typical element of integral cooperation projects itself: keeping open the shared space in the middle from which a project is energetically fed and nourished, beyond what individual participants or members bring in in terms of concrete personal ideas or interests.

Flexible structures and processes appear important in Auroville also in view of the aforementioned diversity of housing forms and the great cultural, philosophical and spiritual diversity among the residents. While all residents are fundamentally free and equal, sometimes even opposing directions of development can be observed in the different sub-communities (ibid.: 72f).

This rather large scope of action for members is quite intentional, as it serves the spirit of research and experimentation of the individual sub-groups within Auroville. With their high degree of autonomy and simultaneous involvement and participation in the overarching common project, they can be understood as holons within a large "community of communities" (ibid., 77f.). Thus, a core element of integral politics is practically tested and implemented in everyday life here.

The fact that "developing spiritual intention should always be the cause and measure of the nature of political, social and economic structures" (ibid.: 77) illustrates that in Auroville, the attitude and practice of inquiry becomes a principle: Auroville is "an ongoing experiment", based on a great "willingness to change when a new invention makes more sense in terms of the goal of developing towards universal consciousness" (ibid., 74). This "willingness (of the ego) to die", i.e. to let go of one's own ideas in favor of common concerns, appears as another crucial building block of an integral political consciousness and culture.

While the Auroville experiment continues to be relatively small in scale, it has proven to be viable and self-sustaining for over 50 years now. This in itself can be considered proof of it being a thriving holon in and of itself, in other words, a living example of Aurobindo's vision of integral politics.

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