

**Speech by the General Director of UNESCO**

**Mr. Koichiro Matsuura**

**Director General**

**UNESCO**

**On the occasion of the inauguration of the Auroville Exhibition**

**Paris UNESCO headquarters**

10 April 2003

Opening Ceremony: Auroville an example of Cultural diversity

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here today to inaugurate an exhibition and a seminar on a city, which brings to life number of ideals that many of us hold. Auroville is indeed a city that is unique in its kind. It did not develop in time to serve the commercial or industrial needs of the region. Instead, it was built for the sole purpose of putting into practice a set of Ideals. Creating a city dedicated to peace, international understanding and human unity may have seemed to be a utopia. But some individuals made it possible. Inspired by the great Indian spiritual master Sri Aurobindo guided by spiritual principles of the ancient Indian tradition of ‘Sanatana Dharma’, Auroville has, since its creation, 35 years ago, developed into a full-fledged city of 1500 inhabitants. The city is still developing and there are plans to expand the city’s capacity to 50 000 inhabitants in the future.

The creators of Auroville were conscious of the magnitude of the task they wanted to achieve. But instead of dismissing the idea altogether, they decided to create a city which could become a model for humanity. The very existence of this city makes every one of us realize that such a dream is not impossible to achieve. In the words of Sri Aurobindo: "With the present morality of the human race a sound and durable human unity is not yet possible; but there is no reason why a temporary approximation to it should not be the reward of strenuous aspiration and untiring effort".

Auroville is a unique human experiment of how to turn ideals into reality. What is extraordinary about this city is that everything is thought in light of these principles; from the architecture to the activities carried out by its inhabitants. The city is evolving constantly and concrete projects have been or are being put in place in areas such as environment, health and quality education. Such projects include the setting up of dentistry with training and research centre, an forestation program for the surrounding area and an International Institute for Educational research.

As Director general of UNESCO, I must say that the principles guiding the Aurovillians are very close to the values promoted by UNESCO. The promotion of dialogue, diversity and development are at the heart of the work carried out by the organization that I preside. We are finding Auroville's empirical experiment of these principles extremely interesting. Like the Aurovillians, UNESCO believes in the concept of unity in diversity. When searching to obtain 'the unity of the human kind', the creators of Auroville did not imply by any means the uniformity of the world. In fact, one of the building principles of Auroville is that although we are all human and therefore one, human cultural diversity is enriching rather than destructive. Difference should

not be perceived as threatening and every one of us should be ready to learn from the other's experiences and perception of life. Of course, being faced with different cultural values, religious beliefs or opinions can be challenging at time. But there is no evolution without challenge. Every civilization has evolved and developed itself in contact with other civilizations. In the same way, human beings evolve by exchanging ideas, discoveries and beliefs with other human beings. This is clearly stated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, article 3:

“Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of economic development, understood not only in terms of economic growth but also a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.”

In the words of the Aurovillians themselves, their project is a microcosm of the world where people from different cultural, educational and political backgrounds meet and work together towards a common goal. These differences can bring tensions but the fact is that inhabitants of Auroville have chosen to place themselves in this ‘melting pot’ accepted to work out their differences in a new and higher way, changing themselves instead of trying to change others as they seek to realize the ideal of human unity in diversity’. The existence of a common goal and common vision of the world and the human being is what makes the Aurovillians deal with their differences in a positive way.

It is important to note that Auroville and its inhabitants are deeply integrated in the region in which they live. Aurovillians could have lived in their own bubble, developing their way of life in a protected environment. Instead, they have decided to participate fully in the everyday life of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages and work with

them to improve their living conditions. Indeed, this area, which was qualified as part of a "most backward area in need of development" by the Tamil Nadu Government, has benefited greatly from the presence of the city. For Auroville has enabled 5000 locals to gain employment and a number of health as well as educational structures have been created at their intention.

To enable us to understand better the practical functioning of Auroville, a number of Aurovilians have been identified to present detailed presentations on major working areas of the city; namely Environment and the Bio-region, Appropriate Building Technologies & Social Sciences, Village Developments & Education, Urban Development & Culture.

I am proud to say that UNESCO, with the Indian permanent delegation at UNESCO, has contributed to the organisation of this exhibition. Such an event will enable people to discover the existence of Auroville and meditate on the values it upholds which tie in with some of UNESCO's major priorities such as Dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions, cultural diversity and culture as a factor for development; poverty eradication, quality education, and renewed energies.

Joining common efforts between our two institutions is the main objective of this exhibition and seminar, leading to the betterment of humankind's welfare and a peaceful coexistence among people belonging to different walks of life. Let us hope that this worthy project initiated in India will inspire people to live up to these ideals in their every day life and even launch such initiatives in their own cities.

Thank you for your attention