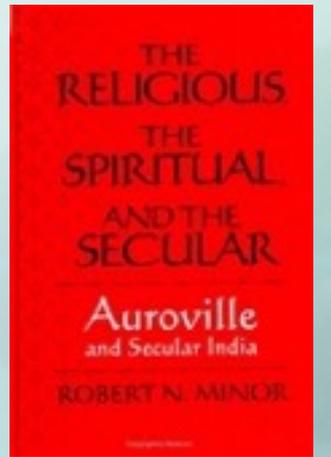
The background of the slide is a soft, teal-colored landscape. It features a calm body of water in the foreground, likely a lake or a wide river, which reflects the surrounding environment. In the middle ground, there are dark, silhouetted mountains or hills. The sky is a pale, hazy teal, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The overall mood is serene and somewhat ethereal.

# Auroville, as utopia, project and reality: anthropological views

Lionel Obadia, Ph-D  
Professor in anthropology, France

# Research and/in/on Auroville

- Connected personally but above all as a scholar
- Starting point : seeing Auroville as a scholar and from a scholar viewpoint
- Academic databases : researches conducted on agriculture, energy, architecture, aesthetics...
- Social sciences and humanities: scarce studies / one monograph (R. Minor) on a particular aspect (secularism)
- Auroville as 'experimental' site and city, a place for innovation
- Hybrid complex of different repertoires of utopia : education, spiritual, ecological, technological, cultural...
- Aurovilians quest for knowledge and wisdom – a researcher 'soul'
- 'Science' is equally meaningful than 'spirituality' here



# Explaining a posture and a method

- As an anthropologist
  - Outsider but attempting to understand from the inside
  - Study based on interviews / observations / review of literature / analysis of online information (2013-2018)
  - A series of interviews : André T., André H., Alain B., Fredrick, Ann, Joss, Geneviève, Louis, Aster, Cristo, Luigi...
  - Posture: sympathy but distance
  - Using discours, writings, and hypertextual information to reconstruct motivations, subjective narratives, ideals
  - Draw interpretations from the fieldwork material and not just from subjective experience
  - Attempt to be faithful to the local experience and cultural frames but establish objective theories
  - Sometimes different to what the local people think of themselves

# Auroville in context

- Understanding Auroville, from the outside, or what can it be compared to in order to understand what
- Transhistorical comparison with other spiritual and utopian projects in history
- Transcultural comparison with other projects in different geographic and cultural locations
- Issues in context :
  - Historical : founded in 1968 (context of spiritual projects established on utopian views, whilst more recent ones are reactions against dystopian – apocalyptic - conceptions)
  - ideological : mix in between indian roots (Aurobindo's works on classical hindu teachings), european modern esotericism (Mother's first appeal to spirituality) and science
  - Cultural : India used to be / and still is a 'mystical territory' in the moral geography of secular europe, and the site of a 'spatial therapy' according to Bruckner (1983)

# Auroville and the issue of « utopia »

- Why referring to the concept of utopia?
- Utopia is in the common lexicon of visitors, observers, and sometimes Aurvolians themselves
- Between academic and insiders's meaning : a project (the overman), a site (the area), different places (pavilions, communities, Matrimandir...), a laboratory for « social spiritual experiment' (Meier, 2006) a reference ('a sanctuary', quoting one interview), a touristic place you have to visit in your 'adventures'...
- Relavance of concept for 'indigenous' (those who live here), for medias and for scholars
- Utopia serves a tool for criticism and irony (medias)
- The issue here : is it an utopia and why does it need to be labelled as such?

SÉRIE

## A Auroville, l'utopie s'est couchée

Par [Béatrice Vallaeys](#) — 16 août 2011 à 00:00

[Villes inachevées 3/6]. La communauté fondée en Inde par une Française en 1968 est aujourd'hui loin de la vision idéale qu'entretenait sa «Mère».

f PARTAGER

🐦 TWEETER



➔ A Auroville, l'utopie s'est couchée

Vous empruntez un sentier, marchez une petite demi-heure quand soudain : un grand globe couvert en son socle par des murets de terre rouge. Vous pensez aussitôt à la Géode de la porte de la Villette à Paris, mais enrobé d'un métal doré (de l'or ?) creusé d'alvéoles qui brillent au

# French medias and the image of Auroville

Utopia as « failure naïve illusion » or as « uncompleted »

analyses et édites

## Auroville, le rêve inachevé d'une cité universelle

BENOÎT GEORGES - BENOÎT GEORGES | LE 06/08/15 À 17:00

SÉRIE D'ÉTÉ. Fondée pour servir la « conscience divine » avec la bénédiction de l'Unesco, la communauté d'Auroville, au sud-est de l'Inde, a été imaginée dans les années 1960 par une Française devenue gourou. Elle abrite aujourd'hui 2.500 personnes sur les 50.000 prévues au départ.

Sur la vidéo datant de 1973, des ouvriers de tous pays s'activent, à mains nues, sur fond de musique traditionnelle indienne. Des jeunes Européens, au sourire lumineux, parlent de « voyage », « d'aventure » ou de « changement de conscience ». L'auteur du reportage, un certain Jean-Pierre Elkabbach, s'émerveille de cette « ville internationale », vaste zone en tache où, sur la terre rouge du sud-est de l'Inde, de rares et modestes bâtiments préfigurent « une architecture

LIRE AUCUN

**Famillière de Guise, une utopie sociale réussie**

# Auroville's ambivalent position in the issues regarding utopia

- Scholars, journalists and students refer to Auroville as yardstick to appraise the theoretical issue of utopia and to evaluate
- A simplified view focusing on one dimension (self-managed organisation, ecological or architectural productions, perspectives on education, and of course, the spiritual system)
- A model of but not always a model for modern utopias (who / where referring to Auroville as reference?)
- Difficulties to categorize auroville ix between different utopian repertoires (ecological, social, scientific, educational, spiritual, ecological ...) appeared in different times (spiritual, 15<sup>th</sup>, social, 19<sup>th</sup>, architectural, 1930s, libertarian, 1960s, survivalist, 1980s...)
- 'Utopia' but firmly supported by UNESCO and the State of India, as well by networks of followers / sympathizers

# Recalling the issue of utopia on solid grounds

- Auroville as utopia ?
  - Spiritual utopia : The making of a supermanhood or ‘overman’
  - A radically new model of society : Thomas More and other ideal cities
  - In practice established after Roger Anger’s plans from Mother’s vision
  - Universalist project in a cultural surroundings : not a rejection but the inclusion of cultural differences and nationalities
  - A complex architectural realization and toponymy illustrating the worldview (≠ most of other contemporary utopian communities whose environment is just functionnally adapted to the )
  - Expect 50 000, less than 3000 : a ‘failure’ ? What is the time scale of reference and the demographic thresold ?
  - If Auroville is a site for the evolution of manhood, then as a place for such a transition needs time
  - Leaving Auroville (for ex-Aurovilians or newcomers) can also be a way to let the utopia unaffected by the tough living conditions

# What makes the difference?

- More's utopia or Rabelais' Thélème : imagined ideal cities, while Auroville has been built
- It is grounded on earth – the soil and the planet
- issues in demography: small groups disappear quickly after their foundation so 2500 is above the level
- Organization : integration of different individuals with different status (visitors, newcomers, aurovilians)
- 'as many Aurovilles than there are Aurovilians' – variations in subjective commitment to the basics but common references
- Auroville is not an utopia but a mixture of different utopias serving a same aim – not only ecological, liberal, political, spiritual in purpose

# The power of an ideal

- the first reflections coming out of this research
- Against the idea that Auroville is ‘simply’ an utopia
  - Entrenched in material grounds (‘building’ something)
  - Architectural and ecological realizations : the effectiveness of the Aurovilians’s efforts
  - Ability to frame new projets within the project itself
- for the idea that Auroville relies on utopian dynamics
  - Able to continue despite the death of the founder and leader – the Mother
  - The expectations of a supermanhood or overman still constitutes the shared grounds for a collective horizon of meanin
  - Dynamics of utopia :
    - return to the source (textual basis and authority of the words of Aurobindo and Mother)
    - exegesis by authors (Satprem, Van Vrekhem, Lithman) – adaptation of the teachings

# 'utopian but not naïve' (extract)

## Outsiders' criticisms focus on the tensions in and surrounding Auroville

- Sectarianism (after Elkabbach's 1973 documentary)
- 'western-wealthy project' in a poor india
- The destiny of other so-called 'similar' projects is to collapse
- old-fashioned 'post-hippie' countercultural mouvement

## Coping with problems

- Lucid posture 'there are problems' in Auroville (interviews extracts)
- Outsiders
  - Relationship with the world as a whole (ex prevent the excess of touristicification as in other utopian cities like Christiania - Copenhagen)
  - Relationships with local communities and the adjustments needed to match a 'european dream in a Tamil land' (jessica namakkal 2012) and cope with violence of the global society
- Emil Cioran's harsh criticism against 'utopia-as-alienation' (the obligation of living in harmony) versus Thomas More's ideal harmonious city
- self-management and organisation of Auroville seem to result from a waving bewteen the two poles

# Back to utopia and beyond

- Finally, to what extent is the concept of utopia relevant here ?
- Utopia : 'beyond' territory ≠ atopia : 'without' territory both references associated with mythology – but Auroville is no Myth, a spiritual project embedded in materialy according to the wishes of Aurobindo and Mother
- Utopia can be negative (= Caliphate for Daesh) or created after / against the idea of global / surrounding dystopias ('sanctuary' ? Auroville was not founded by default of confidence in the world, like survivalists utopias)
- Foucault's heterotopia (being here and there in the same time) : spatial experience, and as well being connected to Auroville outside the site and in transnational networks of sympatizers or representatives
- And even more than this: a way to collate the material, territorial and symbolic aspects, in a genuine topos and non-topos, a kind of super-topia, then

# As a temporary conclusion: from More to Mère

- Auroville considered for itself (singular experience) or as a singular form of a global attempts of humanity to create utopias ?
- « what makes an utopia desirable, it's the fact that it cannot be achieved » (Pironon, 2002) – contradictory with the aim of Auroville?
- Auroville is still standing and alive, and something of an utopia and of another reality – and heterotopia or even a 'super-topia'
- 50 years : small scale time with reference to history
- Utopia is more than ever a topical and relevant way for humanity to cope with destiny and there is nowadays a huge blossom of utopian commynities but for somewhat different reasons
- Why Auroville is standing as an utopia is only the efforts of Aurovilians to put together a certain way to see the future, grounded in a past and heritage, but acting in the present – and therefore to accomodate the retrospective and the projective dimensions of Utopia