

The Philosophy and Practice of Integral Agriculture

PhD Research Proposal, Fall 2025

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Researcher positionality and commitment

Agriculture has been an integral part of my life for the past decade, and I have been preparing myself theoretically and practically to be able to envision a solution that serves both the challenges of agriculture as well as the larger systemic and spiritual issues of our times. I currently work at and manage a farm in Auroville with a large and diverse team, dedicated to the mission of growing food for the community. Auroville is an international township located in the south of India, founded in 1968 and based on the spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and Mirra Alfassa (the Mother). Auroville was created for the evolution of human consciousness through a synthesis of matter and spirit, leading up to an integrality of human experience. The question of growing food for the community here, thus goes far beyond the production concerns of the farm, it also asks us to look at food as a vehicle of higher consciousness. Working on the farm affords me the privilege of experimenting and experiencing these ideas while also being engaged in the philosophical pursuit of what 'integral' means for humanity and agriculture.

I have a deep belief in the value of agriculture for our world today and that of the future. This research is an articulation of my work thus far, a deeper dive into the areas I have not yet explored and an offering to all the future farmers and children of the world who will inherit our mistakes, and our struggles as well as the possibilities that emerge from our attempts.

Research goals

This research explores the multidimensional nature of agriculture and its ecological, social, and psycho-spiritual relationships. Despite its deep entanglement with human consciousness, psychology, and spirituality, most existing research on agriculture focuses only on its material aspects—ecological sustainability, productivity, and now since a few decades, its social foundations and implications. Yet, how has agriculture shaped human consciousness, and in turn, how has the evolution of consciousness influenced the way humans relate to land? This research aims to bridge this gap by examining agriculture as a psycho-spiritual (in addition to the ecological and social) phenomenon that both reflects and shapes human identity. This inquiry leads to questions like- why did human societies shift toward settled agriculture, and how does this transition correlate with the evolution of individual and collective consciousness? In what ways has the formation of agrarian settlements shaped human psychology and spirituality? Conversely, does human consciousness inherently seek to manifest a culture of settlement, creating a separation between the cultivated land and the untamed wilderness? If at all, how has the evolution of human consciousness impacted and been impacted by the development of these social setups?

But these questions are not enough in themselves. My goal is not merely to develop a historical and philosophical framework for agriculture but to map its ecological, social, and psycho-spiritual trajectories. The research aims to build insights from the experience of the past and propose how agriculture can serve as a vehicle for human evolution—bridging material survival with deeper existential and spiritual aspirations. The framework in which this can be made possible is the

philosophy of 'Integral Agriculture' and its practices are the tools for transformation of the land, the community as well as individual consciousness. This framework also attempts to synthesise the ecological, social and psycho-spiritual dimensions into practices and attitudes that reflect the integrality of agriculture in all its forms, applications and experiences.

Food, Body and Agriculture

For us and all life, food has been the fundamental requirement for growth and multiplication. Food materializes our belonging to Mother Earth and the nature of food is exactly that of our physical body. And just as our physical body has subtle bodies, food too has a subtle body. Our consumption of food adds its physical to our physical and its subtle to our subtle. While our physical body carries the memory of the food we consume, our subtle bodies carry the memory of the subtle qualities of the food. There is a verse in the Chandogya Upanishad from around the 6th century. BCE which illustrates this eloquently (Lokeswarananda, 1998).

That which is the subtlest part of curds rises when they are churned and becomes butter.
In the same manner, that which is the subtlest part of the food that is eaten rises and becomes mind.
The subtlest part of the water that is drunk, rises and becomes prana.
The subtlest part of the fire that is eaten rises and becomes speech. (6.5.1-4)

Further, food also has been an object of contemplation in various mystic traditions. It is the apple of Knowledge that enticed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their desire to eat was the reason for their Fall from Heaven to a human world of suffering. In the Indian Vedic tradition, food is associated with matter- *annam*. In this Vedic framework, humans are the custodians of the material world while the Gods belong to the spiritual world and food offerings and sacrifices are a way to

bridge this gap. This idea of food continues into the Indian Upanishadic tradition as well. As Sri Aurobindo (2005) notes, "All Matter according to the Upanishads is food, and this is the formula of the material world that 'the eater eating is himself eaten' (p. 204). Thus food must be considered not only as an object of sustenance of the material life but also as an object of contemplation for a spiritual life. It is a reminder of our separation, our desire to feed ourselves, to be, rather, become complete.

From this understanding, we can say that the body is itself food. As we expend food (our bodies), we seek more of it. And just as food can help bridge the apparent divide between the material and the spiritual world, our bodies are also devices of relationality with the world outside. The body has been looked at differently in different cultures and at different times- a temple, a machine, a tool, an instrument, a means, a distraction, an illusion, and even a possibility. In the rapidly changing world of today, faced with hyper technology and radical virtuality, we are being forced to re-member embodied experiences, the role of the human body in our relationship with others and ecology as well as the evolution of consciousness. Studies like phenomenology have helped in bringing the value of the subjective corporal experience into academic conversation opening new avenues for exploring the limits of materiality and spirituality (Merleau-Ponty, 1965).

As we have seen, food is matter, is body. And the culture where this realisation emerged is agriculture. The word agriculture comes from the Latin *agrum* meaning land, and *cultura* meaning care or cultivation. Simply put, agriculture is both the cultivation of the land as well as the culture of the land, or a culture that springs forth from the land, from food, from matter. In this respect,

agriculture is different from farming which is an activity of growing food. The concerns of agriculture include the issues of society, politics, economics, education, and spirituality, and reflect the collective and individual process of organisation (Berry, 2015). Scientific evidence shows that humans started settling down into agricultural settlements over ten thousand years ago. This move represents an important change for humanity from the wilderness of nature to an intentional participation with nature. It marks a separation of humanity from the forests, an individuation, in Jungian terms, pointing to a self-discovery within the collective context of a polis. Today, we are struggling to not only find a purpose collectively but also individually. One of the most pertinent questions of our times is 'how to realize the highest human potential as an individual and a collective, not as mutually exclusive goals but as complementary necessities for growth'?

Agriculture addresses the concerns of food, of the body's nature and potential, both the individual body as well as the collective body. A new humanity needs a new culture and for that, a new form of agriculture needs to be worked on. Thus, agriculture can help us resolve not only our material hunger but also our spiritual hunger. Agriculture is the curd as well as the butter, the science and art of *annam* as well as the higher realisations that it embodies. The food being offered as a sacrifice of the body to the Gods, the community is an offering of *oneself* to the Gods, the community, and the Universe.

Agriculture of the Posthuman

This self-sacrifice of oneself as food to the Universe means a sacrifice of our conceptions of everything that we are, and this opens up new possibilities of who we can be. This is the seed of the emergence of a new humanity resulting from an expansion of our anthropocentric view towards greater relationalities (Braidotti, 2016). Expanding the idea of what being human means leads us directly to the problems of a future agriculture and an agricultural future- we may ask, what will be the food for the human beyond human, what will be the agriculture for/of the posthuman? Again, Sri Aurobindo (2005) offers his insight on how instincts will be transformed as human consciousness advances. The desire for food, he says:

...has to progress from the type of a mutually devouring hunger to the type of a mutual giving, of an increasingly joyous sacrifice of interchange; — the individual gives himself to other individuals and receives them back in exchange; the lower gives itself to the higher and the higher to the lower so that they may be fulfilled in each other; the human gives itself to the Divine and the Divine to the human; the All in the individual gives itself to the All in the universe and receives its realised universality as a divine recompense. Thus the law of Hunger must give place progressively to the law of Love, the law of Division to the law of Unity, the law of Death to the law of Immortality. (pp. 207-208)

Can we imagine an agriculture that is not constructed around the satisfaction of hunger but of cultivation of love, progress and unity? Can agriculture offer us tools for contemplation as much as physical products to help us make this leap? We have examples in history that show us that agriculture has this potential. From Vedic India in the East to Egypt in the West, deep psychological contemplation thrived in civilizations founded on agriculture. We also have in our contemporary times, the experience of the Indigenous communities from across the world which live in a deep communion with nature and reflect a wisdom of relationality that challenges the limited idea of

'human'. Agriculture, therefore, goes beyond the cultivation of food, it prepares the individual for a relationship with nature, to learn about the cosmic forces and therefore themselves. In Foucauldian terms, we may call agriculture a *technology of the self* that also operates in the social and ecological domains (Foucault, 1988). This research also aims to explore the effectiveness of this technology in working towards a law of Love and overcoming physical death through spiritual immortality.

Foundational research on the subject

A lot of research does exist as various threads of this inquiry. Since this is also a project of synthesis, the research aims to bring in voices from different parts of the world and from different times of human existence. It is worth mentioning here the two schools of 'farming' that have sown the seed for this research over a decade ago. One of them is the natural farming idea from the Zen practitioner Masanobu Fukuoka and the other is Austrian visionary Rudolf Steiner. Fukuoka (2009) said, "The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings." (p. 119). Steiner (2004) also emphasized that the quality of food influences human thought and spiritual development. While both these thinkers have contributed immensely to our understanding of the relationship of the self with ecology and the cosmos, they are quite specific in their approach and therefore sometimes inaccessible in some contexts. We also have the emerging field of ecopsychology inspired by thinkers such as Theodore Roszak (1992), Joanna Macy (2021), and David Abram (2017). We also have the soul-drenching work of the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (2008) who calls for an engaged spirituality. While I have gained a lot intellectually and emotionally from their writings, I have often missed practical solutions or skills to the crises of

our times beyond a call to action for a shift in mindset and consciousness. We also have a diversity of methodologies that have emerged in the last fifty-sixty years which aim to create a new way of working on the land. For instance, Permaculture seeks to establish a permanent agriculture paradigm using design principles and systems theory (Mollison & Holmgren, 2021). There is Syntropic farming which bases itself on the evolutionary principle of nature and attempts to work with it to create abundant ecological systems (Gotsch, 1995). And there are many practitioners around the world with their own philosophy and practice which can be grouped under what has come to be called as regenerative agriculture. However, these are mostly external methodologies based solely on physical means. And since the solutions are solely physical, they overlook barriers that are cultural, social and psychological. We must also look at the huge repository of knowledge and experience of the Indigenous peoples of the world, from whom farming was not just an activity but a way of life. They have given us invaluable wisdom about the sacredness of life, of all life. However, even they are challenged today when faced with modernity and the rapidly shifting realities of our world. Even Indigenous practice needs a revival towards something that can withstand the pressures of the modern world or re-invent itself to continue to be relevant for the future.

In my ten years of study on this topic, I have come across extremely rich material from across the world, but generally either these are theories that are mainly theoretical or practices that are mainly practical and therefore somehow are limited in addressing fully the concerns of our complex times. I have tried to synthesise these approaches in my work and teaching and yet, deeper

research is needed to create a comprehensive eco-socio-psychology around food and agriculture that builds on the visionary work of the thinkers and practitioners that I have mentioned so far. My inspiration for such a work of synthesis comes from the Yoga psychology of Sri Aurobindo which puts action at the centre of philosophy and pronounces all life as Yoga, as a process of transformation and perfection towards a divinisation of matter (Sri Aurobindo, 2005). This approach to agriculture expands its role from the nourishment of the physical bodies to nourishing also our aspirations for a higher life, working as a catalyst for individual, social and ecological transformation.

Proposed methodology

One may call it an action-research project where I will attempt to bridge the gaps between physical, vital, mental, spiritual and psychic dimensions of the research based on the 'integral education' philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and Mother and my expression therefrom (Aurobindo & Mother, 1956). Each of these dimensions will need its own epistemology to find the relevant information and experience that these questions and scenarios evoke. I expect the collection of information will be through a mix of qualitative methods like ethnography, case studies, storytelling, historical research, and autoethnography as well as quantitative methods like surveying and experimentation. I have attempted to map these dimensions of knowledge/research with the three dimensions of agriculture that I have listed above and the lines of inquiry that emerge from their convergence. These will become the major themes of this research.

	Physical (Ecological)	Vital (Social)	Mental (Psycho-spiritual)
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Physical	The structures of the land that make agriculture possible, what kind of land is good for farming and so on.	Can agriculture sustain the material needs of the community beyond food?	Phenomenology of the body, our physical instincts on the land.
Vital	Subtle energies of land, water, soil. e.g. Biodynamics, work of Viktor Schaubergger and so on.	What values and attitudes are required in a paradigm of Integral agriculture?	How working in nature affects our emotions and the way we relate to the world?
Mental	What are the existing theories and studies on land regeneration and how they fit this research?	What kind of community organisations do we need to keep agriculture possible and relevant in the future?	What kind of patterns can we observe in nature and how to map them to our lives?
Spiritual	How land contributes to spiritual experiences? The ecology of spirituality. Eco-spirituality	What symbology have communities used since millennia to reference their place in nature and what can we learn from that today?	Can agriculture provide a spiritual foundation in a time of non-religion? Can it help us to know ourselves better?
Psychic	Can we go beyond using the land for growing food and use agriculture for transformation of land/for its evolution?	How communities transform/can transform towards higher evolution through agriculture?	(How) Can the creative process of growing our food help us transform our consciousness?

Potential for further development

Given the importance of this topic, work in this field can open new discussions within CIIS with the possibility of new courses on the practice of working with the land. We already have several courses within the ecopsychology realm that speak to the connection that the human psyche has with ecology and practices that can help bring healing to both. The practice and philosophy of integral agriculture take this work further into concrete ways of engaging with ecological, social and individual health. My interest is in developing this research as an opportunity for philosophy in action.

With CIIS reaching out globally with its online programs and with classrooms being confined to one's computer screens, we need to imagine how integral studies can be embodied in scenarios

and projects that are accessible to all students from diverse cultures. Farms are such places of experimentation with an integral practice, and I hope that my research could be a humble beginning towards starting a conversation on how the farms can become the schools of tomorrow.

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