

# Auroville Today

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Wishing our readers a joyful 2010!

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**M**ore and more countries are passing legislation to ensure that people with disabilities are allowed to participate fully and equitably in society. In 1995 India passed the 'Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act' which promotes equality and participation of people with disabilities and the elimination of all kinds of discrimination. However, many of the provisions of this Act have not been implemented as individual states need only implement them if it is within their 'economic capacity'.

How is Auroville doing on this front? After all, one would expect that a community which has human unity as its goal and invites participation from all people of goodwill would be in the forefront of this movement. However, this is not the case. Take accessibility. Many of our buildings and public spaces, not to speak of our roads, are difficult to negotiate not only for people with disabilities but for anybody whose mobility is even temporarily compromised.

In the early years, of course, the nature of the pioneering work meant that most Aurovilians were young and able-bodied and little or no thought was given to people with disabilities and reduced mobility. Today, however, a significant proportion of Auroville's population, which includes some of those pioneers, is over sixty and increasingly likely to be physically incapacitated, either temporarily or permanently.

To be fair, awareness of the need to do something has been growing over the years. In 2001, under the auspices of the Asia-Urbs project, there was a possibility to bring an expert to Auroville to work on making it 'barrier-free'. Unfortunately, this did not materialize. So it was not until October last year that the first

## An accessible Auroville for all



PHOTO COURTESY SAMARTHAYAM

Accessing the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir is cumbersome and uncomfortable for people with disabilities.

workshop devoted to making Auroville more accessible for everyone was held here.

The three day workshop was led by a team from *Samarthyam*, a pioneering national organization which works to make buildings, public spaces and transportation systems accessible for all. The workshop was divided into three parts. On the first morning the basic concepts were clarified by Executive Director Anjee Agarwal and her colleagues, access auditors Ashwani Kumar and Debabrata

Chakravarti. They spoke of the need for a "barrier-free environment" which they defined as "creating and maintaining environments in which people can participate in ways which are equitable, dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy, and are safe and affordable". And who benefits? Not only the disabled, but anybody with reduced mobility, which includes people with short-term ailments, senior citizens, pregnant women, families with young children – even people with heavy luggage.

What's it like to have reduced mobility? A blindfold walk in the Town Hall brought this home to participants in a very immediate way, as well as pointing up the failure of one of our major public buildings to consider the needs of the blind and others who are 'differently-abled'.

The second part of the workshop focused on technical aspects of accessibility and how architects and engineers can tackle them. It clarified that barrier-free access involves much more than constructing a ramp or a

handicapped toilet. It requires taking into account the whole environment, including the need for signage, special flooring, lighting, colour contrasts and emergency evacuation routes (see box on page 2).

Most people assume that doing all this would be very expensive, but the *Samarthyam* team emphasised that barrier-free construction costs only 1% – 2% of the total project cost if it is incorporated in the planning stage. To retrofit existing buildings, of course, is more expensive.

The final and most interesting part of the workshop involved Anjee and her colleague Ashwani, both of whom are in wheelchairs, making an accessibility audit of the Matrimandir, the Town Hall, Sadhana Forest and Bharat Nivas (see box on page 2).

In their final report, *Samarthyam* appreciated that Auroville was making efforts towards creating barrier-free environments but noted they were insufficient. It recommended that all public buildings and guest houses in Auroville be made barrier-free; that in each community at least two ground floor living spaces should be made fully accessible for anybody with reduced mobility; and that codes specifying what should be done to ensure full accessibility in all public buildings in Auroville should be framed and implemented by l'Avenir d'Auroville.

Susmita, the Aurovillian who was instrumental in bringing *Samarthyam* to Auroville, is herself partially disabled. For her, the conference marks the beginning of a more conscious urban development which considers the needs of all, something she has dreamed of for many years. "I firmly believe it is a new step forward in Auroville."

Alan

## Towards a barrier free city

**S**usmita, initiator of the recent conference, and Frederick, Pino and Sauro, three of the coordinators of L'Avenir d'Auroville, discuss how Auroville can become a more inclusive community.

**How well is Auroville doing regarding making it accessible for everyone?**

**Sauro:** Not very well at all. Historically there were reasons for this. Auroville was physically very challenging in the early days and the settlements were very spread out, so it mostly attracted only those who were young and fit. Today the environment is more urban, concentrated, we have more public buildings, so we should pay more attention to accessibility. But we are not doing much in this line.

**Pino:** I live in Creativity, a community which is not accessible for anybody who does not have full mobility. It's shameful that, after forty years, Auroville is doing so little to provide full accessibility. We are definitely lagging behind here.

**Why has it taken Auroville so long to work on this aspect? Are there other reasons beyond the ones Sauro mentions?**

**Frederick:** Yes. In the early days the Aurovilians

working on Matrimandir were scoffing at those who took any kind of security measures: 'You don't have enough faith in The Mother, nothing can happen'. When Mother came to know about this she was very upset by this simplistic interpretation of her protection. She was always telling people to have a full faith in her protection but at the same time to do everything necessary to protect themselves.

So there was this feeling that we were on a new wave, that nothing could happen to us and that we didn't have to make any special provision for anybody who had disabilities – although we never excluded anybody who wanted to work with us.

**Wasn't there also some kind of feeling that the pioneering aspect was a test, some form of initiation? Isn't this also why so little was done to change things?**

**Frederick:** True. And then there was that pattern which said that if somebody got injured there must be some reason for it.

Then there was the Matrimandir. Roger was often asked why he didn't make it accessible for people who were disabled. He would brush it aside. 'We are a fraternity', he said, by which he meant that we are a brotherhood of Mother's children and if somebody wants to go up to the



PHOTO MATTHIA

Participants in the 'barrier-free' workshop experience a blindfold walk outside the Town Hall.

Mother's room we would bring them there.

I saw it rather differently. I agree with J.K. Galbraith who said that a society is judged on the way that it cares for its young, old, poor and sick. I think Auroville is now at a stage where it's

an absolute necessity that we make conscious arrangements for these people.

At the same time, it's tricky to create a special category. For example, J.R.D. Tata was rather

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