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shaky on his last visit to Auroville. But when someone offered him his arm to help him go up to the chamber, he brushed it away. "I can do this on my own," he said. So people with a handicap or limited mobility do not necessarily want to be treated in a special way.

Susmita: This is true. I am partially disabled and many times people have offered to help me but I have always refused because I want to do things on my own. At the same time, while people like me can improve our bodies, there is a limit beyond which we cannot go and this needs to be considered. The Ashram, for example, doesn't consider the needs of the old and physically-challenged, even though 50% of the inmates are old and can't walk. So they sit at home and don't participate in the larger life of the community. I hope this will not happen in Auroville where, we shouldn't forget, something like 25% of the present population is over 60 years old (see box).



Before and after: The unsafe 'ditch' around the reception desk in the Town Hall has finally been filled-up.

term 'disabled' implies 'unable to function properly'. But my brother always uses the term 'differently-abled' because if, for example, you are blind, you may develop other capacities which far exceed those of sighted people.

Differently-abled people are often better workers because every day they have to prove themselves, so they push themselves to give of their best. That's why our commercial units should be willing to employ them.

Sauro: We must change the way we think. We used to talk about making Auroville a pedestrian and cycle-friendly city, but now we must plan for an inclusive pedestrian city which is accessible for all. We also have to change this conception that the present condition of Auroville is only a problem for people who are physically-challenged. It affects

everybody with reduced mobility, either temporary or permanent. For example, if you have a back problem you can't cycle on the kind of roads we have now.

Practically what does it mean to make Auroville accessible for all?

Sauro: L'Avenir should take the lead in drawing up a code of practice ensuring full accessibility of public buildings.

Pino: We are already working on it. Within a few weeks we will publish guidelines regarding the need to provide ramps and fully-accessible toilets and bathrooms in all our public buildings.

But the Samarthyam team pointed out that full accessibility means much more than providing ramps and special bathrooms. We are talking about the total environment.

Pino: True, but I don't think we can cover everything right away. All public buildings will have toilets so ensuring they are accessible for all is simple. Providing ramps and handrails on all stairs is also not a big deal. But if we talk about providing lifts, for example, it becomes more difficult.

Isn't one of the concerns that ensuring full accessibility will be very costly?

Susmita: Samarthyam estimates that if full accessibility is planned in from the beginning, it will increase construction costs by only 1-2%. Of course, retrofitting existing buildings is more expensive.

Pino: In the new guidelines for constructions we should specify that an extra percentage be included to cover the cost of fully accessibility. We're talking here about public buildings which cost three or four crore rupees, so a few lakhs extra is nothing.

Frederick: A special fund should be set up, fed through a percentage from these large public buildings, to rectify existing buildings. If there is a will, the economics are not really an obstacle. We should also make a study of the local villages to see what the situation is there and what can be done.

We've talked about the mental and financial blocks to ensuring full accessibility. But what about the aesthetic one? Aren't architects worried that ensuring full accessibility will spoil the appearance of their buildings? Take the Matrimandir. Samarthyam recommended

a number of modifications, like chair-lifts and handrails, to make it more accessible. Are we willing to make these changes?

Pino: Today we cannot make the Matrimandir fully accessible; if we had planned this from the beginning it would have been completely different. But we can make it partially accessible. We can provide handrails on at least one of the very steep ramps which go down to the Lotus pool and we can provide a chairlift for the steps which lead up to the Matrimandir as long as it doesn't compromise the aesthetics.

The Samarthyam access audit team mentioned that the spiral marble stairs leading up to the second level are a particular challenge.

Pino: We can do something there as well. We should do some research to find out what technologies are available. Of course, we don't have to provide accessibility from all sides: only one of the spiral stairways need be accessible.

I suppose one of the points, if you are old or differently-abled, is that you don't want to have to phone ahead and have a whole organization put in place just because you wish to visit the Matrimandir.

Pino: Exactly. But now there are chairlifts which are very small and light and which can easily be operated by whoever is on duty. Basically, we need expert advice about this.

Susmita: Samarthyam has offered to keep working with us. I also want to be trained to do accessibility audits of our buildings and environment so that we don't have to keep calling in outside experts.

Pino: Within the next two to three years we have to see real movement on the accessibility issue. This means drawing up guidelines for public buildings and large blocks of apartments and putting them into practice. We start today.

From an interview by Alan

Essentials for full accessibility

- * Accessible routes
- * Ramps at all entrances and exits
- * Handrails on steps and ramps
- * Way-finding and information signage supplemented with Braille and pictograms
- * All doors should have a minimum width of 900 mm
- * Antiskid flooring
- * Accessible drinking water units
- * Accessible unisex toilets on all floors
- * Acoustically-insulated rooms to keep away ambient noise

So how do we begin to make Auroville more accessible?

Susmita: The Samarthyam team stressed that the first thing that has to happen is to pull down the mental barriers. Once this has been done, the physical barriers will come down more easily.

A mental barrier can mean ignorance of the needs of the disabled, but it can also mean discrimination.

Susmita: Exactly. One Aurovilian I know has a disability which cannot be seen. I asked her to come and work with us but she refused because she didn't want to be identified with this work. She explained that once she had talked to another Aurovilian about her problem and this person had said some not very nice things, so now she wanted to remain quiet. Then there is the example of Christel. She was talking with somebody about joining Auroville and this person told her, "Don't worry, you're in a wheelchair so they will never let you become an Aurovilian."

Frederick: In other words, we only want the beautiful, rich, young, and healthy!

Susmita: Discrimination is also built into the language we use. For example, the



A chairlift: an option for the Matrimandir?

PHOTO COURTESY SAMARTHAYAM

Extracts from Samarthyam audit recommendations

Matrimandir

- 1. Access**
The access path has loose sand and it is difficult to manoeuvre mobility aids, especially when wet.
* A paved path from the parking to the main gate is preferred, as it allows independent movement of persons using mobility aids.
* The receptionist and security people to orient people with disabilities about the accessible path to Matrimandir and Amphitheatre.
* The vehicle already provided for children, senior citizens and others requires adaptation to carry persons with disabilities, including wheelchair users.
* The connecting paths leading to the Matrimandir are narrow (only one and a half meters) and should be widened to allow two wheelchairs to pass each other.
- 2. Access to Lotus Pond**
Steep slopes lead to the Lotus Pond

beneath the Matrimandir. Assistance of more than two people is required to move a wheelchair up or down. Old people and people with medical conditions will also require assistance.
* All slopes to have handrails on both sides of the wall.
* At least one slope to have platform or stair lift provision to carry wheelchair users or older people.

3. Access to petal meditation rooms
Access to meditation rooms in the petals can be provided by means of portable ramps stored in each room and made available for wheelchair users. Inside the meditation rooms there are two steps. Portable ramps can be provided to access the rooms.

4. Access to Inner Chamber
A steep slope and a flight of steps mark the entrance to the Matrimandir. Lifting chairs are available for wheelchair users to be lifted manually up the steps. However, the process of lifting people up the steps and further transfers on the way to the inner chamber is

cumbersome and could be painful not only to persons with disabilities but also for the carers in attendance. Persons with severe disabilities find it difficult to balance and adjust in the narrow lifting chair. It is unsafe and difficult to lift the chair with a person with disability on the marble spiral staircase.
* A stair lift both for outer stairs and inside spiral steps is the best possible solution

5. Access to the Amphitheatre
* Ramps to be provided on the side slopes.
* Level differences at the beginning and end of the slopes to be merged to provide unhindered access for wheelchair users.
* Accessible toilet should be provided.

Town Hall

- 1. Entrance**
* Directional signage for the ramp location to be provided near the steps.

- * Handrails to be provided on both sides of the ramp.
- 2. Reception area**
The unfriendly sunken-area design around the reception makes it extremely difficult to converse with the receptionist by visitors using wheelchairs and other mobility aids. [The area has now been covered with black stone. eds.]
- 3. Ramp to first floor**
* Needs to have handrails fitted on both sides.
- 4. Steps to cafeteria**
* Contrasting colour handrails should be provided on both sides of the stairs at two levels – 700 mm and 850 mm.
* The edges of the steps to have colour-contrasted bands of 50 mm to help people with low vision to make out the depth and height of each step.
- 5. Cafeteria counter**
* A part of the counter to be lowered to 800 mm so that wheelchair-users and children and short stature persons can access it easily.

- 6. Accessibility ladies and gents toilets**
A steep ramp without landing marks the present entrance to these toilets.
* The signage for accessible toilet should be provided on the wall.
* A ramp with landing to be provided as the door opens upwards and it is difficult for wheelchair user to open the door and move the wheelchairs simultaneously.
* Internally, cubicles to have grab-bars which assist in transfer from wheelchair to WC.
- Bharat Nivas**
- 1. Auditorium**
The gravel path that leads to the stage and handicapped entrance at the side of the Auditorium is difficult to negotiate.
* The existing ramp to the stage needs modification. Handrails are required on both sides.
* There is a need for unisex accessible toilet
- 2. Kala Kendra:**
* There is no easy access