MAKING AUROVILLE ACCESSIBLE

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Introduction

The city of Auroville, conceptualized as an ideal township based on human unity in diversity, invites participation from all people of goodwill. It falls short however, with regard to accessibility. Most of the roads, buildings and public spaces are difficult to negotiate not only for the old and infirm, but also for the disabled. In its early years, the nature of the pioneering work saw to it that most Aurovilians were young and able-bodied. Little or no thought was given to the persons with disabilities (PwDs). Today, a significant number of Auroville's population is over 60, making it increasingly urgent to consider the needs of those who, temporarily or permanently, are disabled.

Still, awareness of the need to do something has been growing over the years. In 2001, under the auspices of the Asia-Urbs project, a proposal to make Auroville 'barrier-free' was considered. It did not materialize. It was not until October 2009, that the first workshop to make Auroville more accessible was conducted. *Samarthyam,* a civil society and research organization, working towards making buildings, public spaces and transportation systems accessible, led workshops towards this goal.

Methodology

The first workshop comprised of three parts. In the first part, basic concepts were clarified. The need for "universal access" to "create and maintain environments wherein people can participate in ways which are equitable and dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy, are safe and affordable" was stressed. The wider user-groups it serves was emphasized- not only PwDs, but anybody with reduced mobility. To drive home the point, simulation exercises were carried out. For example, a blindfold walk in the Town Hall brought home to many participants what vision impairments feels like.

The second part of the workshop focused on the technical aspects of accessibility and how architects and engineers could tackle these issues. Barrier-free access involves more than constructing a ramp or an accessible toilet. Emphasis was placed on considering accessible design holistically, including the need for signage, anti-skid flooring, lighting, colour contrasts and emergency evacuation routes.

The final part of the workshop involved Samarthyam's access auditors (two in wheelchairs), conducting an accessibility audit of the Matrimandir, the Town Hall, Sadhana Forest, Solar Kitchen and Bharat Nivas.

Results

While Auroville was making some efforts towards creating accessible environments these were found to be insufficient. Samarthyam recommended that all public buildings and guest houses in Auroville be made barrier-free and in each 'community' at least two ground floor living spaces should be made fully accessible. A subsequent workshop in 2011 by Samarthyam marked the beginning of a comprehensive inclusive urban development strategy. Codes specifying what should be done in all public buildings in Auroville to ensure full accessibility should be framed and implemented by the department-in-charge.

Conclusion
As a result of the workshops and advocacy with key stakeholders, Auroville architects' have taken up the motto "we start today". Access regulations for public buildings and large blocks of apartments are being drawn up and put into practice. This commendable movement towards universal accessibility is in keeping with Auroville's vision.

Topic code
I. Implementation, monitoring and enforcement

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