

# Accessible Auroville

**Report of the 3-day workshop held from 30 October 2009 – 1 November 2009**

**Led by Samarthyam, National Centre for Accessible Environments, Delhi based organization's access experts Ms. Anjee Agarwal, Mr. Ashwani Kumar and Mr. Debabrata Chakravarti.**

The workshop was divided into 3 different sections – the first being the introduction to various concepts and provoking the awareness about accessibility without barriers; the second section was the technical aspects of accessibility inside and outside buildings and how architects and engineers would be able to tackle these issues; the third section was introducing the process of auditing accessibility and this was followed by hands-on audit of a few public places in Auroville.

Starting from basic concepts about what defines a barrier free environment, as an environment in which people can participate in ways that are equitable, dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy and are safe and affordable; and to who benefits from such environments – not just disabled people, but everyone, including people with reduced mobility due to temporary ailments or senior citizens, pregnant women, people with heavy luggage, families with children; and access is not just having ramps or accessible toilets but it is about the diverse needs of **all** people including those with reduced mobility or disabilities. This section of the workshop tried to break myths and beliefs using dynamic simulation exercises of a blind fold walk around the Town hall!

The second section started from the Universal Design (UD) concept as the design of products and environment to be used by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design. For example, not to do a design and then change it later on, when so much more energy and effort would be needed, but to think of a design that fits all, from the very beginning/planning stage. UD considerations and guidelines would have to be applied to all places within buildings – steps, ramp, floors, lifts, toilets, signages, etc. besides the external environment – here, the cycle paths of Auroville were much appreciated, but the need to widen the gates was mentioned, as wheelchair users cannot access these paths easily.

The third aspect of the workshop focused on the process of Access Audit which was defined as a survey tool to identify barriers within a building and outside also. Giving assessment from which initial suggestions can be done and using these suggestions from the report, specific people can be involved in the design modification of the building. Audit covers accessibility to the building from outside – pathways, parking places, lighting, signages, etc; entry to the building itself and within the building – steps, thresholds, doors, seating, lighting, floor surfaces, levels, handles, staircases, toilets, washrooms, eating spaces, safety measures for emergency situations, help facilities for assistance in a building.

The team went to visit different places in Auroville like Bharat Nivas, Savitri Bhavan, Sadhana Forest and Matrimandir and in each of these places appreciated the different details, but also offered valid and pertinent suggestions as part of their access audit exercise. The fact that the Government of India has brought out various laws and regulations for building guidelines regarding accessibility, it was urged by the Samarthyam team that it would be best if Auroville could also develop its own guidelines (some Codes on essential accessible elements in the buildings) in the near future.

That Auroville is envisaged as a city with a universal philosophy that encompasses all aspects of society and culture, having an environment accessible to its entire people, is also part of the universal design concept – including people who have reduced mobility due to various reasons or with specific disabilities. Also physical barriers can always be removed or changed, but the main blockages from mental barriers through our own attitudes are what we will have to address before looking at the physical barriers – to assess our own sensitivities to barriers.



**National Centre for Accessible Environments**

A project of Samarthyam Trust (Regd. No. 35922)

B-181, Mansarovar Garden, New Delhi-110015

Telefax: +91-11-41019389 (M) 9810558321

Email: samarthyaindia@yahoo.com

Web site: www.samarthyam.org