

Keeping it rolling...

The contrast could not have been greater. On one side of the dirt track which leads from Certitude to Matrimandir, an industrial road-building operation was underway: earth-movers and rollers were manoeuvring tons of granite chips into rigidly-controlled curves. On the other side of the track, outside the Solar Kitchen, small groups of young enthusiasts were constructing playful shapes out of low-cost materials.

It seemed like two different Aurovilles – the big-scale, bureaucratic, controlled one versus the human-scale, intuitive, somewhat anarchic one.

But, in fact, the enthusiasts working outside the Solar Kitchen were not Aurovilians at all. They were young people from all over India who had joined a four week workshop designed to make Auroville a more cycle-friendly place.

The workshop was the latest in a series of initiatives and events which suggest that cycling in Auroville is at last emerging from being perceived as a fringe, slightly lunatic activity to becoming a genuine transportation alternative. The new wave began gathering pace a few years ago when high-quality western mountain bikes became available in Pondicherry and Chandresh began converting conven-



The path, the bicycle and the cyclist all are one...

ILLUSTRATION BY ORIAN

tional cycles to electric cycles (the 'QTs'). This was followed by the publication, on AVnet, of a well-received study by Karl-Heinz Posch, an Austrian traffic-planner, who wrote that cycling should be promoted as the most important transportation form if Auroville is not to be devastated by the internal combustion engine. Among his suggestions was that the cycle path network should be extended as quickly as possible.

This actually became possible in March this year when six lakhs of government money was unexpectedly made available for such a project.

The 'Bicycle-friendly Area Design Workshop' which was held in Auroville from 18th May – 17th June brought together 16 young professionals and graduates in architecture and graphic and product design. There were two main objectives. One was to explore a collaborative, multi-disciplinary, user-centred design process. The other was to demonstrate some low-cost, practical ideas for creating a more cycle-friendly environment.

During the first week the participants gathered information. They interviewed cyclists and observed cycle usage. Above all, they cycled themselves – everywhere – in the hottest month of the year.

The second week was spent identifying the obstacles to making cycling more pleasurable and coming up with possible solutions. This was done collaboratively: Auroville mentors took turns to run sessions on different aspects and participants worked together to gen-

erate ideas. These ideas were then narrowed down in the light of existing constraints – a limited budget, limited time and the skills available. Eight different projects were finally identified, and the participants split up into teams to begin the work of materialising them.

At the end of the second week, each team presented their project to the whole community. The resulting feedback was incorporated in the detailing of the designs. After one more community feedback session, in the final week the participants materialised the designs in a true hands-on experience. The final products included innovative cycle parking structures, a barrier to prevent motorised transport using cycle paths, a cycle path lighting scheme, a rest area, a design for junctions where motorised roads and cycle paths meet, cycle accessories and a cycling map of Auroville.

All of these were demonstrated outside the Solar Kitchen on the final day of the course and most remain in place to be used by cyclists using the Solar Kitchen.

The feedback from Aurovilians was very positive. Although some of the projects still need refining – the barrier in its present form effectively bars not only motorcycles but also some cycles from using the cycle path! – many of them have been adopted by Auroville units to take to the next stage of production.

Above all, it was the collaborative spirit of the workshop which enthused both participants and Aurovilians. 'I'd never worked like this before, I wouldn't have thought it possible we could create so much in so short a time,' said a participant. 'It's woken up Auroville to a whole new way of working,' said an Aurovillian. 'It shows what can happen when people drop their personal agendas and work for a common goal.'

'Now we have to take this forward,' said another. 'It's up to us to keep this rolling.'

Alan

"The collaboration was remarkable"

Raghu and Chandresh coordinated the workshop. What was their intention and does it open up new possibilities for Auroville's development?

How did this workshop come about?

Chandresh: Two years back a group of us, including Raghu, began meeting together to talk about what Auroville urgently needs to do to take the next step in its community and infrastructural development. One idea was to use expertise from outside to help solve Auroville problems.

Raghu: In terms of Auroville's development, the key issue at present is the shortage of people with the required skill sets. That's why we have to look outside. So the idea was to get people from outside to work with Auroville experts and to channelise all these energies into something tangible, useful. We decided to begin with a workshop on improving the cycling environment as this seemed doable in the short-term.

As we wanted to try out a collaborative model of problem-solving and we didn't want to work with too many unknown factors, we restricted participation to people from India. We also decided to draw our participants from postgraduate students and young working professionals.

At our first introductory session I explained the basic principles of the workshop. Firstly, nobody would own any of the ideas: everything would be collective, Open Source, available for anybody to use. Secondly, the workshop would run on a goodwill basis. There would be no workshop fee and no corporate sponsors. Instead, everybody would offer what they could in a spirit of goodwill.

Why should such a workshop be attractive to professionals from outside?

Raghu: I worked in the Research and Design industry for 25 years and when you work in industry your scope is limited to what your company is interested in: all the time you are thinking within a particular box. So professionals are always looking for opportunities to think in different ways; to be in environments where new ideas are generated that they can take back and implement them in their own field.

Innovation happens when you connect the 'wrong' people at the right time. A lawyer or a doctor in a design team sparks off innovation. Put ten designers together and nothing new comes out. This is why we put together participants from different disciplines and why we allowed, for example, architects to work on non-architectural projects. This way they discover new fields, new approaches.

Secondly, Auroville itself is very interesting to these people because it's very much hands-on. In one month they got a tremendous learning experience which they would never have got in a university or a company because not only were they generating ideas but they also had to construct them on the ground. This meant managing their own budget, learning how to use the materials, supervising workers etc. It was the whole cycle, an integral experience.

The first week of the workshop was spent collecting information about cycling in Auroville. What were the most interesting findings?

Raghu: It emerged that most of the cyclists on our roads are local people commuting to work. The next biggest group is guests. The smallest segment is Aurovilians who cycle for pleasure, lifestyle or health reasons.



Raghu (left) and Chandresh

Chandresh: We noticed that the villagers always carry something on their cycles – tiffin bags, wood etc. – and that some of the loads are large and unwieldy. They don't complain, they are used to it, but we wanted to see if we could do something for them as well as for the Aurovilians who cycle. Some of the Aurovillian cyclists complained of being treated like second-class citizens: they feel everything here is designed for motorcycles and cars. For example, at the Town Hall there is no dedicated parking for cyclists.

Raghu: In the focus group interview, the Aurovillian cyclists said they wanted the cycle paths to have a certain character. They didn't want them paved or fantastically lit but to be made of natural materials and unobtrusive. They also wanted them to run through nature, away from the noise and dust of motorised traffic. There were also concerns about places where cycle paths cross motorised roads, as accidents happen here.

Did the workshop receive much support from Auroville?

Raghu: The support was tremendous. Firstly, of course, we had the Auroville mentors who gave freely of their time and expertise. Then various Aurovilians or groups sponsored different things,

Ulli sponsored our use of the Multi Media Centre, SAIIER sponsored the participants' lodging and lunches, L'Avenir covered the cost of prototypes, Living Routes offered their cycles, the Road Service sent across their mechanical digger to speed up some digging work. In fact, I've never seen this level of collaboration anywhere before. Nobody said 'no' to us.

And then, of course, there were the open sessions with the community. Here Aurovilians gave feedback on the participants' ideas – this was crucial as the whole process was user-centred – but they also

said it was great to see so many people working together with such a young and inspiring a dynamic. I think this meant more to the participants than anything else.

What about the collaboration between the participants?

Raghu: That was also remarkable. None of the participants knew each other before arriving here, but by the end of the second week everybody had a very good working relationship and they could work together in any combination. Then again, it was truly collective thinking: it was impossible to say which idea came from which person. Later, when they split into groups to materialise different projects, they continued to move from project to project, helping each other. Nobody felt possessive about a particular project.

In terms of moving Auroville towards being a cycle city, none of these projects is likely to be a key lever. What do you think that lever could be?

Chandresh: I've been thinking about this for many years. I believe that if you can provide a cycle which is maintained centrally then people will switch from motorised transport. Today it's a hassle to maintain a cycle. If you could pick up a cycle,

go to the next place and drop it off and not have to worry about maintaining it, I think many more people would choose to cycle. If you mix in some electric cycles that would also be good, but the cost is too high at present.

Raghu: We need action at three levels to make Auroville more of a bicycle city. Firstly, there is the community systems level which Chandresh is talking about. Secondly, there is the need to improve the physical environment for cyclists, which is something we addressed a little bit in the workshop. Thirdly, there is the need to change attitudes and values. At some point it has to become 'cool' to cycle so that if you're on a motorised vehicle people you'll feel uncomfortable. It's much tougher to change attitudes. It can happen but it will take time.

Again, if in the city planning process priority is given to non-motorised vehicles that will definitely make a huge difference.

What is the significance of this workshop for Auroville's future development?

Chandresh: The collaborative aspect is very important: not just the participants but many of the Aurovillian mentors were working together for the first time. If they can keep working together and draw in more and more Aurovilians to work on different projects, we can develop much faster.

Raghu: So far development in Auroville has happened in 'islands', lots of individuals doing their own thing. We are nowhere near critical mass yet so this working in isolation is normal and natural. But as Auroville grows we have to work on the next phase, which is 'clustering'. Here you can still have your own responsibility or 'brand', but now you work together with others so you can handle much larger and more complex projects. This is the only way we are going to be able to build Auroville and I think this workshop has provided a model of how we can take that next step.

In terms of enhancing the cycling environment, quite a few of the products can go into the next stage of development. The cycle map definitely will go into production and some of the accessories are very interesting. It's worth mentioning that we began and ended the workshop with a zero budget and that we made all the prototypes for less than one lakh rupees.

If this workshop is a pilot project for community infrastructure projects, what might be the next area to focus upon?

Chandresh: 90% of the city still has to be built, there's so much to do. But I think the next important area we could explore in this way is low-cost housing.

Raghu: Actually, the opportunities are endless. The main thing is we should be prepared to welcome people from outside to work with us in solving our problems. At present I think it's the only way to go. When we have 10,000 people living here, when we have some kind of critical mass, it will be a very different situation.

(From an interview by Alan)

In their own words...

REST AREA

“Using recycled waste materials like broken *jallies* and cement rings, we created a rest area under a tree where cyclists can sit, meet friends and even enjoy the sounds of a wind-chime.”- Deepti

BARRIER

“We came up with a barrier to prevent motorised transport using cycle paths. Gillian had already done a few designs, including a horizontal beam with a notch in it allowing only cycle tyres to pass through. But motorcyclists could easily ride over this and some cyclists found the gap too narrow. So we raised the height of the barrier and made it



The *Slinky*: “We didn’t want to tell anybody how you should park – we didn’t want to do the linear thing – but to make it something playful.” – Kums.

more of a feature, and we provided a funnel approach which allows cyclists to align their wheels.”- Silky

ACCESSORIES

“We wanted to design accessories to help both Aurovilians and villagers. We designed pannier bags

which can carry 5-6 kilos in each bag and which, when they are folded, act as a cushion for a passenger. We wanted something which would give employment to the villagers and could be mass-manufactured by them.” – Vidya

JUNCTIONS

“We used rammed earth mixed with sand and cement for the cycle path surface. Where the path crosses a motorised road, we raised the path so that it acts as a speed-breaker on the road. At junctions we also incorporated granite pieces in the surface to give a different texture and warn people they are approaching a junction.”- Mukta

LIGHTING

“We devised a system where a sensor switches on path-directed LED lights when a cyclist passes by. The power will come from the solar panels and batteries which power street lights.” – Akshay



Workshop participants with their Auroville mentors

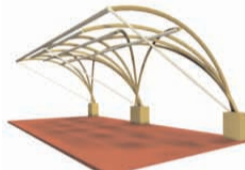
Priyanka: We’ll never forget this place. It has a different aura to it.

Akshay: I’ve never before worked on a project where we mixed and matched the teams and where we had to materialise the designs ourselves. It was a great experience.

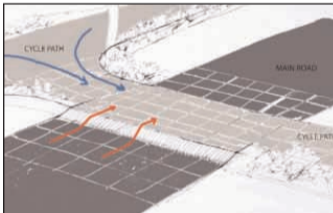
Anshu: I think when cyclists see us doing this for them, it makes them feel a little special: they are not used to this treatment in Auroville.

Supratim: Once you let go of your ego barriers everybody becomes much more creative. It’s been a great learning and we’ve all grown a lot as individuals.

Kums: Normally when you work on a design you become possessive of it, you don’t want to change it. Here, because it was nobody’s idea, everybody felt free to change and improve it so that, at the end, we got something we couldn’t have got working on our own.



Clockwise from above: Pannier bags; concept for cycle shed in bamboo; carrying hook; universal torch-holder; junction of rammed earth and granite; barrier against motorcycles.



Section of cycle map: “The standard Auroville map is too complex. So we made a simplified map for cyclists, listing only things guests would need to know about and using a circular grid. We named the major cycle paths after trees and the junctions after flowers.” – Nash

“It must be the year of the cycle paths”

Gillian was one of those who pioneered the construction of cycle paths in Auroville and she continues to be the coordinator for their maintenance and development. How does she assess the present situation? Is there more support and facilities for cyclists in Auroville today? And what could make Auroville more of a cycle city?

Auroville Today: When did you first get involved with cycle paths?

Around twenty years ago, when the motorised traffic was becoming too much for people who cycled, a group of us got together and started the first cycle paths. Then the others dropped out so for many years I worked alone, with people lending a hand now and then, usually when there was a path they really wanted to see happen.

For many years we didn’t get any official funding – it was all private donations. Our first big donation was from the Gateway project: we got Rs 50,000 [approximately 1,000 US dollars]. Later we received a regular budget from Auroville for maintaining the existing cycle paths, but as it was only Rs 1,000 a month it was very difficult to do much.

Then, in March this year, L’Avenir asked me if I could build six lakhs [12,500 US dollars] worth of cycle paths in two weeks! It was government money for development and, after exploring other options, they had suddenly thought of cycle paths. To me it felt like the time spirit was opening the door. So I said, “Of course”, and I used the money to develop and fence over three kilometres of new paths.

When we started making cycle paths twenty years back, we didn’t want them to be beside motorised roads because of the noise and dust, but there was no alternative then. However, the new generation of cycle paths we’ve made are all deep in the forest and provide a very different experience of cycling through nature, something we’ve been aiming at for years.

I’m hopeful we can keep up the momentum. It must be the year of the cycle paths as there has been so much focus on them. L’Avenir has indicated there is more funding for their development and maintenance to enlarge and consolidate the network.

Why has it taken so long to get community support for cycle paths? Are we talking about a clash of different cultures here, different approaches to developing Auroville?

Yes. We’ve always had these two things going on in Auroville – the linear approach which uses big money, big machines and would like to ignore existing developments, and the other approach which runs on goodwill and voluntary cooperation and usually very little funding. The two approaches have clashed at times over the years but now I think there’s a coming together. People are beginning to realise that we can collaborate.

What was the importance of the recent workshop for you?

Those young people – Young India – brought in so much that would never have been generated by us. We provided the infrastructure, the knowledge and the support, like a chalice into which they could pour their enthusiasm, imagination and skill. They were fabulous. I really feel this will be one of the ways that Auroville will be built because Aurovilians need this kind of stimulus.

What about the products the participants came up with? Do you see yourself using any of them on the cycle path network?

The raised road crossing idea is great. Now road crossings are not marked which makes them potentially dangerous for visitors. For their benefit these safety zones need to be developed. When they are built there will be a sign on the road either side of the crossing to alert motorists they are approaching a crossing and must slow down.

The ‘Slinky’, the bike parking sculpture, is another great and functional design which I would love to see in other places around Auroville.

What do you see as the key lever that will get people off their motorcycles and on to cycles in Auroville?

I think beautiful, shaded, off-road and well-connected cycle paths would do it. If they are not only sweeter but faster why wouldn’t more people use them? It would also be good to have an outpost of Kaniappan’s repair workshop at the Solar Kitchen to fix simple things like punctures. We could also collect information about which bikes to buy and publish it on AVNet.

However, people seem ready for change only when conditions force them to change. Maybe when petrol is too costly and harder to get?. This has happened already all over the world where more and more people are cycling on vast networks of cycle paths developed over the past few years.



Gillian

Not everyone is going to cycle and I don’t think everybody needs to. What is more important is that people are showing more awareness. This is demonstrated by the enthusiastic response in Auroville to electric cycles and electric motorcycles.

Finally, it’s all about goodwill. There’s always a lot of goodwill among cyclists – they have to adjust to overhanging branches, tree roots and other cyclists on less than perfect paths. Auroville is all about goodwill, about making things work. That’s why I’m optimistic about our cycling future.