Keeping it rolling...

The contrast could not have been greater. On one side of the dirt track which leads from Centrre to Mammaner, 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 enthusiasm 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 becoming perceived as a fringe, slightly kooky activity to becoming a genuine transportation alternative. The new wave began gathering pace a few years ago when high-quality mountain bikes became available in Pondicherry and Chandresh began converting conventional cycles to electric cycles (the ‘eCycles’).

This was followed by the publication, on AIVMT, of a well-received study by Karl-Heinz Pozsch, an Austrian traffic-planner, who wrote that cycling should be promoted as the most important transportation form if Auroville is not to be devasted 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 the lack 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 ideas: 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 generate 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. 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 group. They then spent the week revising and refining their projects in the hope of generating feedback which would influence their design.

All of this feedback was submitted to the Solar Kitchen on the day before the course and most will 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 it to the next stage of production.

The workshop enshrined both participants and Aurovilians. ‘I never worked like this before,’ wouldn’t have thought I could create so much in so short a time. ’The feedback was very positive. Let’s do a 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.’

Raghu: 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 terms of its urban renewal and development.

Raghu: One idea was to use expertise from outside to help solve Auroville’s problems.

Chandresh: At our introductory session I explained the basic principles of the workshop. Firstly, nobody would own any of the ideas, the ownership would be collective, Open Source, available for anybody to use. Secondly, the workshop would run on a good-will basis. Then there was the issue of corporate sponsorship. 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 disciplines and why we allowed, etc. At 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 collaborative 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 project by project, helping each other. Nobody felt possessive about their own project.

Raghu: In terms of moving Auroville towards being a cycling city, none of these projects is likely to be the 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 electrical assistance, it 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, that’s the physical environment for cyclists, which is something we addressed a little bit in the workshop. Thirdly, there is the need to change the values.

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 Aurovilians mentored were working together for the first time. If they can keep working together and develop a sense of ownership and confidence 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 is a work in progress. Once we have identified the critical mass, the next step will be to move forward. But as Auroville grows we have to work on the next phase, which is ‘clustering’. Here you can still have the advantages of living and working alone but 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 develop Auroville. 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 phase. We have to find the right people who will go into production and some of the accessories we developed we worked on different projects and 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 involvement in other 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 problem is we’re not going to be able to get 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 jalies 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.” – Deepthi

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 more of a feature, and we provided a funded 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

**“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?
Gillian: 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 $1,200 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 and connected cycle paths.

I was very happy we can keep up the momentum. It must be the year of the cycle paths as Auroville has been so much focused 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?
Gillian: 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?
Gillian: 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 do you see as the key lever that will get people off their motorcycles and on to cycles in Auroville?
Gillian: 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 Kanappan’s workshop at the Solar Kitchen to fix simple things like punctures. We could also collect information about which bikes to buy and publish it in 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.

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.

(From an interview by Alan)
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