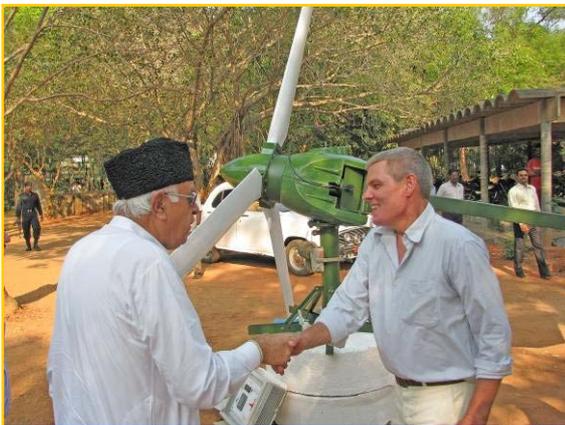


An earthy minister of the Sun!

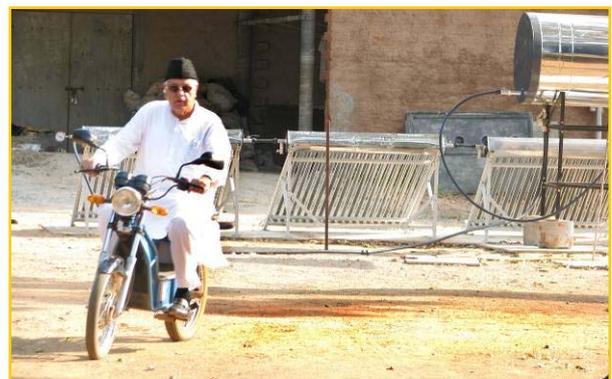
Tejas Joseph (text) and Hemant Shekhar (photos) of Aurore

Dr. Farooq Abdullah's visit to Auroville

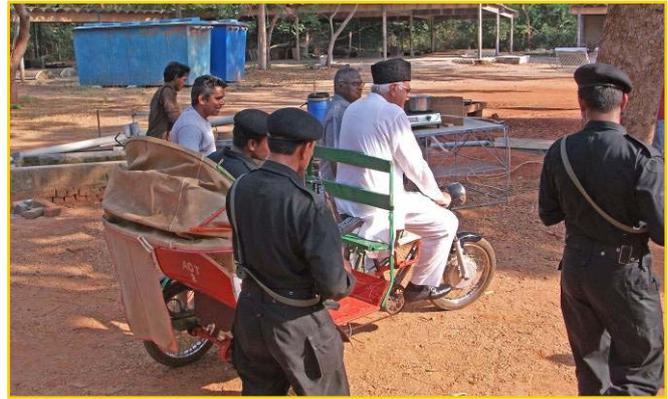
[The international township of Auroville](#) had a celebrity visitor on the afternoon of 23rd March. Being a luminary of India's ruling political class we were mentally prepared for predictable eventualities, not least being a total cancellation of his Excellency's visit. Our first inkling that this persona was not cast in the conventional political mould came when the ministerial convoy arrived at the Auroville Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) gates dot on time, give or take a few minutes. We were surprised (and delighted) by his effervescence and spontaneity, which belied his stately years. He was drawn to the exhibits from



the word go and engaged the exhibitors with insight and intelligence. First sighting made was the 'Genie' from Auroville Wind Systems, a small home made wind turbine that resembled a military helicopter on its launch pad. He then moved on to inspect a prototype of a solar air-conditioning system before turning his attention to the EVfuture electric bikes with the glee of a 13 year old appraising a row of shiny new toys...



True to his style (which came as a revelation to us) he insisted on test riding one, offering a spectacle that could have been the envy of a movie set director : a high ranking minister of the union Government of India riding an electrically powered bike prototype built in Auroville, obligingly being 'chased' by a security man with a machinegun! As if this was not enough fun for our 'sunny minister', he decided to also test ride the 'transport of the future' - a solar rickshaw! This time, however, he was



compassionate to his security personnel, asking one of them to sit in the rickshaw as passenger while he performed due diligence of this innovation as driver. He gave it top marks, remarking later at the round table that "the Solar Rickshaw presented an appropriate transport option for crowded Indian cities at a time when they were on the 'extinction list'. They could provide employment to many. This innovation could take away the drudgery and strain of physical peddling, making it easy for the driver and a pleasure for the passenger. An old form of human transport had been reinvented to address the combined challenges of urban personal transport, employment and pollution in one package. Bravo!" This was a tribute to the passion, zeal and commitment of our resident scientific and technological innovators. His eyes cast a long look at the array of Aurore's king sized (500 lpd) solar water heaters on the western perimeter of the CSR campus with steam coming out of their vents. "Impressive display of solar power in one place" he must have been thinking!



At tea his Excellency was affable and interactive talking to all and sundry, particularly students and visiting interns, enquiring after their work and life. At one point, tea cup in hand, he sauntered over to the Earth institute next door where he took a 'lesson' on the comparative advantages of compressed earth blocks over conventional bricks in terms of cost, ease of (localised) manufacturing, durability, energy efficiency and low eco footprints. He was impressed enough to ask his secretary to look into how building entrepreneurs from around the country could be exposed to this novel building material. On his way up to the round table at the conference hall he was



given a glimpse of a variety of solar lamps and lights that held the 'power' to dispel the gloom of rural darkness. It prompted him to remind us that the Government was giving rural lighting the priority it deserved. At the discussion that followed the honourable minister for new and renewable energy shared a few private (and uplifting) moments with us of his visit to the Matrimandir earlier in the day where, he said, he had felt a 'palpable energy' when standing in the presence of the 'ray of light' in the chamber.



“The elements - earth, water, wind and fire (symbolised by the sun) were traditionally worshipped in ancient India, indeed in all ancient cultures. In these troubled times burdened with the problems of pollution, nationalism, civil strife, corruption, economic uncertainties and environmental damage, it is imperative that this cycle of revering the elements be started up again. It would be an act of faith and resurgence aimed at finding the balance lost along the way. The sun, the seat of unlimited energy, is a symbol of this renaissance. Let us embrace it with a spirit of understanding and a renewed commitment to a new way of life”. His parting notes were inspiring to us who worked at Aurore CSR - “The innovations here had imagination. Their charm lay in their simplicity, making them useful and appropriate at the same time. Additionally (and unusually so) they had a very redeeming quality - that of being relevant to the social, cultural and environmental needs of a developing India”.