The Work of Auroville’s Land Board
Part 1 – The Mandate and the Current Team’s Achievements

INTRODUCTION

Few people realize the enormity of the work of Auroville’s Land Board. A small community-selected team of Aurovilians, currently just 6 people, has the mandate for the tremendous responsibility of leading, organizing, and managing all of Auroville’s land protection and land purchase actions during a three-year term. The current Board of Banu, Helena, Padmanabhan, Rajavelu, Renu and Yuval is an example of cooperative teamwork, considerable concrete results and dedicated service that is supported by the larger team of members that include Adhi and the wonderful field team, Ayyanar, Krishnamoorthy, Naveen, Anjali, Jothi, Cleo, Deoyani, Murugan, Mani Pillai, Kamalakannan, Sathyaseelan, Anoop, Balamurugan, and Aryadeep of LFAU, with Mandakini of the AVI Board, Joël, Sigrid and Daksha.

It is a complex job that is crucial for Auroville! In recognition of this immense work, we are dedicating a series of articles to what is involved in their actions and responsibilities. In this first installment, we recognize with gratitude the progress made by the current leadership team, some of whom are now finishing their 3-year term. Future articles will present what is involved in the work of the secretarial, resource, field, legal, document verification, mapping teams, land stewards, and the Lands for Auroville Unified (LFAU) fundraisers.

The Land Board expresses its gratitude to the many supporters who have continued to donate, even in the difficult year of COVID. Their donations are our resources for land purchase and show how much they understand - and care about - the importance of manifesting Auroville’s physical body.
«Things are happening!» is what people notice when they enter the Land Board office on the first floor of Town Hall. Despite the many challenges and frustrations, there is a sense of satisfaction with the concrete progress achieved in the three years of this team’s mandate. There is a new spirit of energy, harmony and optimism. In the past two and a half years, 38.82 new acres were added to Auroville, of which 30.48 acres came in the past year of COVID (March 2020 to February 2021). Additionally, considerable improvements in systems, processes and positive new relations with landholders were achieved by the current Board.

THE LAND BOARD MANDATE AND THE WORK INVOLVED

The first Auroville lands were bought in 1964 and the land base has grown over the years - slowly or quickly, depending on the period and available resources. Auroville’s land today includes 3390 purchased acres. The Master Plan Area is defined as 4942 acres (approx. 20 km²) with the City Area designated as 1274 acres (approx. 4.91 km²) and the planned Greenbelt as 3668 acres (approx. 15 km²). There are 368.4 acres of village settlements within Auroville’s Master Plan Area, and 342 acres of Peromboke (in-common) lands and Temple lands. An additional 1173 Auroville acres are outside the Master Plan where long-standing seaside, greenwork, educational and health projects have been developed.

Protecting this precious heritage is a daily responsibility and buying the still-missing acres is the other crucial task. Today, approximately 100 acres are missing from the City Area and about 1000 acres from the Greenbelt as designated in the Master Plan. Auroville’s amazing success in greening the once arid land, and building a dynamic cultural hub, has made the international township an attractive magnet for land speculators and outside developers. Together with Puducherry’s growing urban spread, these conditions have created an ever-growing competition for land use and purchase, and the increase in land prices.

Buying the land now is an urgent need for consolidating the Master Plan area before more land is lost for Auroville and non-AV developments are created on the City of Dawn designated area. This requires accurate, up-to-date documentation, positive relations with landowners and knowledgeable, good-faith negotiations - plus energetic fundraising, since Auroville’s land consolidation purchases are funded solely by donations.
The Land Board’s work in the office includes team planning meetings about land purchase, strategy meetings for dealing with boundary issues and encroachments, coordination meetings with the Auroville Foundation, the FAMC, the Working Committee, and with Aurovilians. There is the all-important institutional memory database work for dealing with court cases about property ownership, boundary issues, and other legal and historical issues.

Stewardship of plots is assigned and there is monitoring of the 208 acres already stewarded by the Land Board that holds and protects them for future projects. Additionally, land leases are managed, including the 120 acres of organic cashew plantations and the collection and distribution of cashew-lease income and timber sales. AND – to round out this very full « To Do At The Office » List - there are the meetings with prospective buyers and negotiations with interested sellers.

But that’s not all - there’s also a packed list of urgent Land Board’s activities that take place outside the office: on-site visits to AV plots and to plots for potential purchase, surveys and mapping, participating in planting work on LB-stewarded plots, trips to the Land Registration Office in Vannur for recovering or checking documents and for signing new land purchase agreements.

Here’s some of the team in a relaxed moment with a bit of the stress momentarily off their shoulders:

![Team Photo]

From left to right: 1st row - Yuval, Anjali, Banu, Jothi, Murugan, Rajavelu. 2nd row - Cleo, Kamalakannan, Renu, Helena, Ayyanar, Naveen. 3rd row: Anoop, Padmanabhan.

Learning to understand and then to effectively manage all of this requires a steep learning curve. The 6 Executive Members all agree that it takes at least a year to get a grip on this multi-faceted complexity which includes the 53 years of Auroville history to catch up on, the background of plots that are newly-proposed for purchase, and the traditions and laws that provide the framework for land ownership. Land proposed for purchase is of two kinds, each with its own complexity: ancestral land where detailed inheritance laws apply and where all of the legally-entitled heirs must agree to the conditions of sale; and land that is no longer ancestral but which can have a complex history of the transfer of ownership where the deeds of property may or may not be in conformity.
Additionally, laws such as inheritance rights for female family members are in evolution, and intense research is often needed to ensure that the rights of each heir/heiress have and will be respected. All this must be understood for purchase and land protection actions.

Due to the escalation in land prices, the Land Board, teams, and stewards have to face increasing aggressiveness in the many cases of boundary violations and plot encroachments. They are the ones on the front lines. The Land Board, the teams, and the stewards often face situations involving threats and physical risk.

After the success of signing land purchases, there are the quiet times when the team gathers in meditation to consecrate new Auroville acres, a deeply satisfying reward for all the efforts:

And there are the energetic happy times of tending the earth and protecting the land. When you see an orange tee-shirt you know the Land Board’s teams are at work!
THE CURRENT EXECUTIVES AND THE TEAM’S ACHIEVEMENTS

The Land Board members are chosen through a community selection process and generally their names are proposed by others who recommend them. Some hesitated before accepting, knowing full well the load that this would add to their lives, but all decided to accept the challenge. All have families in AV, thus with a stake in Auroville’s future and several are old-time Aurovilians. Each has come with a background of diverse work and service to the community, and together they reflect Auroville’s cultural mix. The executive team came in two waves to join an existing team of 31 total members.

In 2018, Helena, Padmanabhan, Banu, and Yuval were selected:

- **Yuval** is an AV old-timer who arrived from Israel in 1986. He has significant experience and sensitivity with working the land as the developer of the Eternity community, and came to the Land Board after working in the Housing Service. He’s the father of the «Eternal Gang» - 5 Aurovilian children and eight AV grandchildren.

- **Helena** was born in the former Soviet Union and came to Auroville from Germany in 1994. For almost 2 decades she served as librarian, caretaker and administrator at Transition School, and is currently co-manager of Santé. She and the Land Board’s Ayyanar actively support Rajan in running the Brahmanaspati Kshetram center dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in Edyanchavadi Village.
- **Padmanabhan** is Tamil and grew up in Auroville with his Italian adoptive mother. Multi-lingual, he has experience in marketing and has held positions in Auroville’s Budget Coordination Committee (BCC), Human Resources Team (HRT) as well as SAIIER. He has been involved in village welfare actions and helping people who need hospital care. His family covers three generations: 5 children along with his mother, now elderly, who lives at home with them.

- **Banu** comes from a farming family of a nearby village. With a deep attachment for the land, she is involved in the development of a project for the transition from pesticides to organic agriculture. She has 18 years of experience in administration at a dental center and is an « Art for Land » contributing artist, as is her daughter.

... and Renu and Rajavelu were selected in 2019:

- **Renu** came to Auroville as an infant in 1965. In addition to her rôle as a Land Board executive, she is also an executive of the AV Art Service, and has served on the Working Committee. She has 2 Aurovilian children plus Aurovilian parents.

- **Rajavelu** comes from Kuilapalayam Village where his family still lives. He’s a long-time secondary school and A-level teacher in math at Auroville’s Future School and NESS. He continues to teach part-time in addition to his Land Board responsibilities.

In addition to their co-management for all the activities, each has chosen areas of special focus:

- **communication and reports:** Renu
- **institutional memory database:** Helena
- **document scrutiny and due diligence:** Banu
- **field work and field team:** Rajavelu
- **financials (income from leases and wood, land purchases, accounts):** Helena and Padmanabhan
- **land protection and trouble-shooting:** Yuval and Rajavelu
- **negotiation with landowners:** Padmanabhan and Banu
- **land registration:** Rajavelu, Banu, and Padmanabhan

**THEIR THREE YEARS OF PROGRESS!**
The team’s watchword is «progress». With shared determination, goodwill and a harmony of vision, this Land Board has achieved very significant results. Their many land purchases and their considerable improvements in systems are a legacy to Auroville and the Land Boards of the future:

**Land Purchase**

**38.82 acres were purchased in the past two and a half years** consisting of 23 consolidating plots for the Greenbelt communities of Two Banyans, Fertile Windmill, Infinity, Kalpavruksha Farm, Newlands, and near the Visitors Centre, Udavi School, and Siddhartha Farm plus the purchase of a very large composite plot along Irumbai Lake that came with water resources and a borewell.

**Acceleration of the purchase process and improved relations with landowners**

The team has found ways to accelerate the purchase process from two years to six months, making it more attractive to sellers. This and their positive attitude has created a harmonious change in relationships with ancestral landholding families. One telling evidence is that certain families refused more attractive offers from speculators and preferred instead to sell their land to help secure the Auroville area. We are eternally grateful to these landowners for their solidarity!

**New Institutional Memory database**

A serious gap in systems has been filled by this team’s creation of a true institutional memory database – an ever-growing documentary record of reports, meeting notes, decisions, encroachments, boundary disputes, surveys, maps, contracts, inheritance information, email exchanges, court cases, police interventions and other significant events. This work-in-progress is the result of the team’s intensive efforts to establish a resource that will be of true help for accessing history and all types of vital data.

**Improved due diligence and document scrutiny procedures**

For the history of property ownership concerning past and future land sales, documents must undergo intense detailed scrutiny. Are the documents complete? Are they in conformity with the law? Is their validity put in question by other documents? Have clerical errors slipped in, including at government offices? Is there the possibility of legal contestation by a neglected family member or previous owner in the chain of land transfers? On the basis of contracts and deeds of sale, can a proposed sale go ahead? At present there are 34 ongoing court cases, some of which have been pending for 14 years and an additional 4 cases will be added. Mr. Kamalakannan collects these documents for the lawyer’s opinion. The Land Board has instituted new systematic procedures for document scrutiny and validation to try to decrease the possibility of future disputes. Sathya Seelan assists the Auroville Foundation lawyers for most of the cases. Ayyanar assists in following up with the Registration Office, and Krishnamoorthy is active in this important area as well.

**Better strategies for dealing with encroachments and boundary problems**

With the increased competition for usable land, boundary disputes and encroachments have become increasingly frequent. The Land Board has provided the manpower for erecting 1083 meters of fencing required to prevent grazing and encroachments. Adhi manages the Field Team that performs this work. At the request of the Auroville Foundation, a detailed report of all lands that have been encroached on has been created. Apprentice Aurovilian Naveen along with Ayyanar have taken up this work with the assistance of our surveyors Murugan and Mani Pillai. In many cases the team has had to be physically present to defend the land, and then go to Police Stations with the stewards to report land abuses and threats. These facts on the ground have led the team to seek better strategies for pre-emptively avoiding such situations, and to find a better approach for dealing with them. Sriramalu with Balamurugan both work liaising with officials on a variety of issues.
Creation of regular strategy meetings with coordinating committees

An important new feature that the team has instituted is the creation of joint weekly meetings with the FAMC and Working Committee. Here again they have instituted new and needed procedures for strategic planning and problem-solving. This has greatly improved their ability to make timely decisions for purchases and collaborative action. Additionally there has been greater coordination with the L’Avenir team on establishing priority areas for consolidation and developmental planning.

OUR RECOGNITION AND GRATITUDE TO THIS TEAM !!

The work of land protection and land purchase for consolidation is enormous, urgent, and fraught with problems. The situation remains a many-sided challenge. Despite so many built-in difficulties, the Land Board’s leadership – along with the intensely hard work of their teams - has achieved significant progress in many vital areas. Their solid approach is bearing fruit and gives us assurance that they will continue to make good use of the solidarity coming from our land donors.

Acres for Auroville congratulates them and thanks them!

May 1970.

The lands for Auroville
are to be bought and
can be bought.
The money is needed
will you help?