

The Greenbelt under threat

The children laugh in Johnny's school, hidden in the shade of Fertile Forest. They play in lush green landscapes, surrounded by indigenous flora and fauna. The plants and animals are finally returning after decades of careful green-work implemented by some of Auroville's earliest pioneers. This is unending education, a youth that never ages.

Half a kilometer away, an earthmover claws at the stumps of recently burned trees, clearing yet another two acres for private development. Fertile Forest – already home to a spa, a politician's holiday "farm house", and an eight acre "eco"-resort – will soon add a hotel and bus shed to its local landmarks. This is the future.

Standing at the intersection of Johnny's cycle path and the *peramboke* road running past Dana, one becomes acutely aware of the devastation the area faces. Workers employed by the owner of the temple lands leveled one corner of the temple land, rerouting the Auroville cycle path in the process. A wide clearing through the same plot of temple land provides access to a dormitory of corrugated metal sheets, illuminated in the darkness by the kerosene lanterns of out-of-state workers. They are here to build a hotel. A narrow sliver of Auroville-owned forest separates the hotel plot from a larger clearing, again made accessible through temple land. This private property will become a bus shed for the half-dozen buses used to shuttle students to the nearby college (also built in the greenbelt) every day.

The largest contiguous portion of the 148 acres of temple land controlled by the Mailam Swami connects eight different Auroville communities: Fertile, Fertile East, Aurogreen, Two Banyans, Udumbu, Samriddhi, Meadow and Dana. In the July Forest Group meeting, stewards commented on the use of this temple land; of its value as place to walk, cycle, ride horses; and of the danger of it being cleared – especially to give access to the surrounding private lands.

"If development happens within that swami tope area, then the connectivity of those pieces of Auroville land is lost, and even more development will come. That'll just spoil the whole atmosphere," Paul Blanchflower explains. "So many people want to buy land on the edge of Auroville because it's now such an attractive place, and now we also have development inside."

He's right. Across town, 68 acres of land for real estate have been developed within the outer boundaries of Auroville's gazetted Master Plan. A private owner cleared his plot near Silence and promises to develop a metal-plating factory. Near



PHOTOS: CATHERINE

An earthmover clears the forest for a new development.

The Greenbelt also serves as a site for organic farming. The Auroville Farm Group envisions a community that has easy access to affordable, sustainably-grown organic produce. For this vision to manifest, Auroville requires either partnerships with organic farmers in the bioregion or large contiguous areas of Aurovilian-owned land. "If you have a farm far away, you're going to be surrounded by pesticides; if you have a farm in the Greenbelt surrounded by non-Auroville land, you'll be surrounded by pesticides," explains Gilles Guigan, a member of the newly created Town Development Council (TDC) and the Land Coordination Committee. "If you want to do organic farming you have to consolidate the land; it's absolutely obvious."

The buffer provided by the Greenbelt is also crucial to protecting Auroville's core mission. "There are important historical reasons for the Greenbelt," explains Cristo Mabilat, a member of TDC and the Green Group. "Auroville is an intentional community. If you have neighbours who live in ways that are so contradictory to the way of life

But Gilles, sitting across the table, offers another perspective. "Why should one thousand people own so much land in India?" he wonders. "We have difficulty holding the land we have today, and it would have been even more difficult to hold more land then."

"The problem is that the Auroville population has not yet come," Gilles adds. "It has been the same story from the beginning. If you ask for money for land, people outside will ask, is Auroville happening? Is Auroville a big circus, or is it the place where there will be a big change of consciousness?" He shifts in his chair, visibly frustrated. "And what do you see if you come to Auroville? You see the tea shops and such where the tourists are hanging out."

Given the financial crunch facing Auroville at the moment, finding more funds for the farmers and foresters, or for buying land in the Greenbelt, or for fighting development seems unlikely and – according to some – unnecessary. "Let us be clear, the project here is a city," Gilles says. "Sri Aurobindo and the Mother did extraordinary work in the middle of a colonial township, Pondicherry. So it can be done; it's not a big deal."

In fact, Greenbelt or no Greenbelt, Auroville already has an unusually green future planned. Flashing the maps in Auroville's Master Plan, Toine explains the ratio of green space to developed land. "Even if we could only realize half the Greenbelt, the ratio of city to green – of built-up to not built-up – is something like one to four. I can't think of another city in the world that has that ratio."

In the meantime, the Land Coordination Committee continues to buy land in the Greenbelt when it becomes available at a reasonable price. The focus, however, remains largely on obtaining ownership of the city area and of nearby Greenbelt lands. "After that there is the question of land usage; it has to remain green. Whether it's owned by Auroville or not doesn't matter," Gilles suggests.

In fact, many groups are exploring ways to keep the Greenbelt green even if Auroville does not own the land. In this context, the Town Development Council, composed of people from the former l'Avenir d'Auroville, the Working Committee and the Governing Board, may have an important role to play. "This is one more step in the protection of our area," explains Gilles.

To protect the Greenbelt, Auroville's TDC in collaboration with the Green Group is immediately moving to create a realistic land use plan for Auroville and to identify byelaws for the Greenbelt. The TDC and the Green Group have invited urban planner David Stein and landscape architect Achva Benzinberg, both of whom love and want to protect Auroville, to assist them in this.

Yet while TDC and others explore legal protec-

tion, the number of plots in the process of development continues to grow. "As time goes by, more and more land is lost or gets developed and the problems get more and more intricate," says Paul. For Paul and many others, the solution is exchanging outlying Aurovilian-owned lands outside the Master plan area for privately-owned plots inside that would consolidate larger pieces of Auroville land. "Exchange is the only tool. It's not an easy tool, but it's the only tool," he says. "All the significant pieces of land we've got since July 2005, when the former Secretary Mr. Sharma left, have come through exchange."

Land exchange in Auroville has been a heated debate for many years. The recent exchanges of Auroannam and Service Farm, both still in process, have fostered strong resentment in the hearts of many – especially some Farm Group members. "Land that has been cared for by Aurovilians has a special energy and it is good that this land extends beyond the boundaries of the magic circle, the Master Plan as set out on the map," explains Priya Vincent, a farmer.

The Future is ours to shape

"The real thing we need to do is manifest Auroville's ideals. This is the only way," Gilles insists. "There is an occult protection, an occult help if we manifest these ideals."

Occult Protection. Exchange. Policies. Partnerships. Purchase. The ideas for protecting the Greenbelt are many; the action is often too little, and too uncoordinated. "People have to do what they feel they can do. The danger is you feel someone else is doing something so you don't feel you have to do something," says Paul. "The only way to engage people is to get them involved. The Greenbelt Protection Squad is a good start."

The Greenbelt Protection Squad is a growing group of more than a dozen "ordinary Aurovilians" with an interest in saving the Greenbelt from undesired development. Organized by the Green Group, the project aims at creating a grassroots movement that collects important information, raises awareness, supports the Town Hall groups in working to protect the Greenbelt, and ultimately fundraises for a variety of purposes.

"Since I've been living here in Adventure, I have seen around me the progressive destruction of this area of Greenbelt. Now Adventure is a green island in a sea of new developments and of village housing," groans Manohar, a member of the Squad, after its first gathering. "I am so happy to see new enthusiasm in facing this challenge, which for me is one of the most important in Auroville."

Paul laughs. "That's the whole point of Auroville! It's not what we've done; it's what we can do."

And we can save the Greenbelt. As long as we believe it. As long as we want to. As long as we put our energy into it.

Catherine



A new hotel in the Greenbelt

the Visitor's Center, a giant billboard with a shiny Matrimandir in the background heralds the sale of plotted land to anyone interested in living near Auroville.

Given the rapid growth of India, the increased development is hardly surprising. But a Greenbelt riddled with development would be a significant loss for the community.

More than land and atmosphere

According to the Auroville Master Plan, published by the Indian Government in Delhi in 2001, the City is to be surrounded by a Greenbelt that would house innovative experiments in afforestation, land development, water conservation/aquifer recharge, rainwater harvesting, building technology, community participation and energy, among other areas. The Greenbelt would serve as "an important environmental safeguard" and "is an integral part of Auroville's development and its proper use is crucial to fully achieve the objectives of Auroville."

you try to manifest in Auroville, then this is certainly going to create endless conflict. We need a buffer; we need some protection from the outside world."

At the same time, as Toine van Megen points out, "It's not just a Greenbelt for Auroville; it's a green zone for the whole region."

To Buy or Not To Buy?

In the face of rising land prices and the rapid growth of surrounding India, it's hard to understand why Auroville didn't buy all the land decades ago.

Cristo offers one version of history: "A decision was taken by a group of people in 1990 to concentrate only or mainly on purchasing land in the city." He pauses to gaze out of the window, soaking in the urban forests in the distance. "Charlie from Aurogreen sent a letter saying this was the most short-sighted decision ever because it was by buying the land in the Greenbelt that we would protect the city. And today he has been proven right."