

## Thamarai: "We listen to the needs and try to respond to them"

**T**hamarai Community Centre was born in November 2006 in a house in Edaiyanchavadi village. The idea to start the project came from a wish to build bridges of understanding between Auroville and the village and, to this end, the Thamarai team is made up of people from both places. The Centre offers a daily play group session for pre-school children and after school programmes. These include help with homework but also many creative activities, from clay work to playing music and reading stories.

A little more than a year ago Thamarai's second project, The Healing Centre, was opened as an educational and treatment centre for the promotion of empowerment through health. And that is not all. They have just built a village playground and they are helping set up a new centre for after-school programmes in nearby Kottakarai village. We went to speak with Bridget and Muthukumari from the Thamarai team to learn more.

**Auroville Today:** What were the main challenges in the creation of Thamarai?

**Bridget:** Maybe it was educating ourselves. We started with an aspiration of building a relationship between the village and Auroville but we didn't know how we would do it.

The original idea was to work through the women's groups in the village. They asked for help with their children's education, so the concept of a play group and after school programme formed. There was a lot of learning for us. The first night we opened we had made twenty little desks, expecting only that number of children would come. But nearly one hundred turned up!

So the first few months in Thamarai were a bit chaotic. However the right people came and that helped structure the programmes. Finance also came. Now, three years down the line, the project feels very solid and we feel we are moving into a deepening phase where we would like also to focus on how we can help strengthen the relationship between Auroville and our surrounding neighbours. Can we make it easier for guests and Aurovilians to come into closer contact with the villages? And how do we help the villagers better understand what Auroville is and is trying to manifest? The Auroville concept is very beautiful but to many it is very abstract. We have very different life experiences and ways of viewing the world, so a lot of misunderstanding can result from this. But it's a huge opportunity for learning and growth.

The word Thamarai means 'lotus flower' and we picked that image because we wanted Thamarai to be a place that supports the flowering of potential of all that crosses its doorway. So while we try to listen to the needs and respond to them, we also see our role in opening up new possibilities and horizons. The children are under a lot of pressure to do their homework, so in the after-school programme we help them with it. But we also do a lot of creative stuff with them because we feel it will open them up to experience something else.

**And this educational aspect grew into the Healing Centre?**

**Bridget:** In the beginning we thought that the Healing Centre could be a place that supports the local healers to teach the practices before they

die out. But what has really formed since we opened is our connection with the local school. A different class comes every day for an hour's health education and yoga class that is now part of the school curriculum, and we have special classes for teenage health issues. We also have quite a number of women and elderly that come every day for both treatment and education. We have a great team. Aurovillian

chakras. There is also a Women's Group which comes every day for yoga class. Many of them had a lot of health problems, like asthma, diabetes and anaemia, but when they started doing yoga these problems started to lessen. Primarily we want to empower people to take control of their own health, to learn about their body and how it works.

**Are there certain topics which are very sensitive, which you do not feel you can touch?**

**Muthukumari:** The whole area of sexuality is quite sensitive. We have started addressing it in our teenage health class with the help of Suryagandhi. There are also many other areas such as children's rights that we may address in the future. I give a menstruation class for teenage girls, introducing them to personal hygiene and yoga asanas and other remedies to relieve pain. At first they were really shy, but then they started to ask a lot of questions. Now the girls who have not yet started menstruating say that when they begin, they will not worry about it. The girls also say they will teach their mothers, because many of them suffer pain and don't do any work at this time of the month.

**How do you deal with children coming from problematic backgrounds?**

**Bridget:** Because we are outsiders to the village, this kind of issue is difficult for us to deal with. However, the village Youth Group, young men in their thirties, are a fantastic support for us. So if there is any concern about a child, we plan with them how to proceed. We also lean a lot on Anbu from Village Action Group who has a vast experience. So when there is a problem we do not take the front line but let others do the talking and we are the back-up support. But even if the children's home background is difficult, if Thamarai can provide a safe and happy place for them, they learn that such a space exists and it is something they can aspire for in their future lives.

**What are the long-term goals of Thamarai and the Healing Centre?**

**Bridget:** It is to build relationships and friendship between Auroville and the villages. Auroville needs a very positive, dynamic and harmonious relationship with the villages so that we can co-evolve together and support each other's future. There is huge potential for both places to grow together.

**How are you supported financially?**

**Bridget:** Thamarai has been supported by donations ever since it started. We keep our cost base low and are very dependent on volunteers from both communities. The village gave one of the buildings we occupy for free; we only had to support the renovation costs. To me it is important, if you are doing development work, that there should be a mutual exchange. So this is what is so lovely about the present arrangement, it is a mutual coming together, a co-creation between our two communities and we try to hold true to this principle as much as possible.

*Deborah*



Circle time at Thamarai

Muthukumari is an assistant nurse and yoga teacher. She gives classes in health education, hygiene, nutrition, different aspects of health and yoga. She manages the centre. We also have wonderful support from the Botanical Garden team and from Sathya and Sathyamoorthy who do a lot with environmental health and nutrition and gardening. They are the local village youth group leaders and we hope to address some of the health issues men in the future.

**Muthukumari:** We feel children are the future and change will come through their education and awareness. We have become very aware of environmental challenges, especially since the Pondicherry garbage dump is right on our doorstep and their policy of burning plastic is really being felt. So recently I have worked with the children on the health effects of burning plastic. Then some of the children took action and went to the restaurant across the road from their school and told what they had learnt and asked them to stop burning plastic. The restaurant people agreed. The children now want to make signs to put up in their village explaining the toxic effects of burning plastic.

It's quite hard to change the adults, but if you can actually open the children to different ideas and possibilities there is hope.

So at our Health Centre we focus primarily upon education rather than treatments, even though we do treatments as well. We have an acupressure machine and give integrated healing technique, which is balancing the energetic field and cleaning and energizing each of the

## SPORTS

### Auroville marathon 2010

**I**t has been described as the "most awesome and one of the best-organised" marathons in India. On February 14, runners from Auroville, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry, the surrounding villages as well as from Mumbai, New Delhi, Pune, Gurgaon, and Kochi, ran down dusty tracks, forest trails, canyons and roads to complete the quarter (10), half (21.1 kilometres) or full Auroville marathon (42.195 kms).

Firstly, let's hear from one of the runners: "The trail, as usual, was the most spectacular aspect of this marathon – green all the way. The full marathon runners started in pitch darkness, at 5.00 am. With their torches, they looked like fireflies flitting in the dark. The half marathon started at 6 am. It was still dark, but 10 minutes later the sky woke up. The path went through serene forests, with the smells of eucalyptus, wild grass and herbs in the air. Those first 10 kilometres were meditative and aromatic.

"Then it started to warm up and the trail kept springing surprises, with soft and sandy and uneven and barely visible tracks. Aid stations, two every 4 kilometres, were welcoming, well-manned and quick in offering much-needed fluids. After the second aid station it really heated up and the aid stations just seemed to get farther and farther away. People started grouping together and we could see them running together in perfect harmony. After the 18 km mark, a lot of people were seen walking. Then came the tar road which we thought signalled the end, but it didn't. It took us back into the narrow 'no-overtaking-allowed' paths, running past small gates, jumping over mounds, struggling to move in soft sand. Finally we heard



Jesse (left) starts off the half-marathoners before the break of dawn.

some cheering and realised the finish line was close. A sprint to the finish, and then heaven awaited in the form of foot baths, massages and a rocking breakfast. It was an awesome experience!"

This year's marathon had a high Auroville runner participation, with more women running than men. The first place in the women's category for the full marathon went to a first time marathoner,

Aurovillian Ing-Marie. In total about 760 people took part – 120 runners for the full marathon; 320 for half; 190 in the 10K run; 90 for the 5K; and 40 children in the special 2K fun-run.

Chandresh, one of the organizers, said that there were almost 200 volunteers helping with the organization, with a dozen team leaders coordinating the myriad details of marking the route, preparing the medical, emergency and message logistics, security parking and road traffic, dinner at the Visitor Centre, breakfast at Certitude and outreach logistics. These included T-shirt design and order registration, hotels and guest house information, and providing dormitory-style accommodation to over 300 runners around Auroville. Then there was the video team which played music along the route, while providing live coverage at <http://marathon.auroville.com>. If the running experience was 'awesome', so was the organisation!

*Compiled from a report by the Marathon Team*

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