

"Yes we can!"

Nammal mudiyam - the "we can" project - is a project of the youth of Edayanchavady. As a step in transforming their village, they organized an alcohol-awareness programme on 28th February in the temple square. Why did they choose this topic? What was the response? And what other barrier was broken on that day?

According to an article in *The Times of India* of 13th April, Tamil Nadu has the highest alcohol consumption of all the states of India. Although the per capita consumption is higher in one or two other states (including Pondicherry), almost half the male population in Tamil Nadu consumes alcohol. While the numbers who are addicted is unknown, reports suggest the problem is very widespread.

"Alcoholism is really a major problem in the local villages and it is getting worse," says Shankar, who runs an Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) programme in Edayanchavady. "Alcohol is the main reason for every problem in the village, and every household is affected," says Prabha, who works with the Thamarai Healing Centre in the same village. Those problems include violence, poverty, crime, ill-health, early mortality and frustrated educational opportunities for children.

But was it always like this? If not, what changed? Kalai, a member of the local Youth Club also working at Thamarai, says the change happened when the State Government licensed bars all over the state to sell alcohol. The closest one to his village is in the neighbouring village of Alankuppam.

But it is not just the older men who drink, says Thamarai (a community volunteer and secretary of the local development council). "I noticed in 2005 that most of the younger boys in the village were starting to drink. At night, they would sit in the playground and drink. There is an age limit for buying from the bar but the older boys would buy for the younger ones. When I saw the young boys drinking, I warned them. Afterwards, I started a sports club for them and this really began to change their habits for the better. But I had to close the club due to politics in the village."

Meanwhile, the youth of Thamarai had attended a *Stewardship for New Emergence* workshop in Auroville with Monica Sharma. During the workshop, they became aware of their own inner capacity, reflected on the problems they perceived in society and realised they had the ability to create change. In a subsequent meeting between the Thamarai team, Sridhar from *Yatra Media* and Roland (AVI France) the possibility arose of a project through drama or film. To the question "What would you like to change in society?" they chose alcohol consumption as it was perceived to be at the root of many health issues.

There was a touching moment, a few minutes after the answer emerged, when a young drunk man stumbled in the gate and fell asleep on the platform outside the Thamarai Healing Centre where they were meeting. "So this confirmed for everybody that this was the major issue that needed to be worked upon," says Kalai. "This man was only 25 years old but he had already spoiled his body. We youth do not want to be like that. We want to change, to make our village an alcohol-free space."

But how to tackle the problem? "We had more than forty meetings to discuss the topic," says Bhuvana from the Thamarai Centre, "and that was a big commitment because we are in college all day." "Finally," says Kalai, "we decided on a well-being campaign that included a drama, a skit on the bad effects of alcoholism, because people would see this and remember it for a long time."

Every Saturday night for months they would meet, initially in Thamarai and, once rehearsals started, in film-maker Srinivasan's *Yatra* Centre in Kulilpalayam, to share their stories about alcoholism. "We talked about what happens in our families and in those of our neighbours," says Savitri, who had come to Thamarai as a child and is now one of the after-school teachers. "At the end, when we combined these into one story, we all felt it was actually our story."

The story

The drama begins with a young man going to his friend's birthday party. While all his friends are drinking alcohol, he is drinking Coca-Cola. They make fun of him and get him to start drinking by telling him that he will enjoy it and it won't make any difference; he can stop at any time. But by the end of the party, he is completely drunk.

After that, he begins drinking more and more. He has a good friend who tries to get him to stop, but the influence of his other friends is stronger.



A scene from the skit on alcohol abuse

His parents are desperate. Eventually an uncle suggests that they get the young man married, in the hope that his wife will stop him drinking. But this also fails. Every day he is drunk and beats his wife and his children, who cannot concentrate on their studies. Eventually, he falls seriously ill and is admitted to hospital. There he has a vision. A good spirit appears to him, shows him what his present life is like and explains how an ideal man should behave.

The young man is transformed. He joins a de-addiction programme, where he meets other addicts and gets guidance on how to avoid alcohol in the future. Then he takes up sports and yoga, gets a good job and begins to look after his family well.

The Thamarai youth decided they would present the drama to the whole village on February 28th as part of a larger wellbeing programme (to emphasise that physical wellbeing is an antidote to addiction). The programme also includes alcohol awareness talks by de-addiction specialists, hatha/acro yoga, Tamil martial arts demonstrations, art and shiatsu. There was enthusiastic cooperation between Aurovilians and villagers in putting on this programme.



Planning the play with Srinivasan

The response

On the day itself, there was excellent attendance for the alcohol-awareness activities, which took place in the middle of the village. What was the response of the villagers to the programme, particularly to the drama? "When we spoke to the women about it," says Savitri, "they said it was very good because this is exactly what happens. They wanted us to do more programmes like this so that the people with alcohol problems would change."

"Some of the people said they were seeing their own character and the fights they experienced being played on stage," says Bhuvana. "During the skit there is a song about how the drunkard loses everything because of his addiction, and at this point one man in the audience started crying."

Kalai mentions that the father of one of the boys in the drama is an alcoholic. "When the boy came home that night, his father was so affected by what he had seen that he promised on the head of his son that he would not drink again. And, until now, he has not." "That is the fourth person I have heard of who stopped drinking after the programme," says Bridget.

"Now we want to take this programme to many other villages because the problem is so widespread and this is such a powerful way to bring awareness,"

says Bhuvana. However, they are aware that bringing awareness is only the first step. This is why they are also organizing follow-up programmes for those who want to become alcohol-free. These include weekly Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings in the Thamarai Healing Centre, and Al-anon family counselling sessions at the Auroville Village Action Group office in Irumbai. There are also wellbeing activities for women and young men.

How many men are signing up for the AA classes in Edayanchavady? Savitri reports that about fifteen men come regularly but they are all from other villages. "They don't come from this village because the meeting at the Thamarai Healing Centre is right in the middle of the village and they are ashamed to be seen coming here." "We are aware of the stigma," says Bridget, "so perhaps the men from this village can go to the AA meeting in Auroville when it is held in Tamil."

Further action

What else can be done? "These people need jobs," says Kalai, "because at the moment they are sitting around all day with nothing else to do but drink."

Muthukumari, coordinator of the Thamarai Healing Centre, mentions that for some time they have run Hatha Yoga classes in the Centre. One man who attended was an alcoholic and through doing yoga, he managed to stop drinking. "He was one of the people who did the Hatha Yoga demonstration on the alcohol-awareness day. In the youth club we also have sports like volleyball and kabaddi. After the programme some of the young people asked us if they could join in sports. So this could be another outlet so their minds do not run on wrong things."

All the major political parties in Tamil Nadu are promising they will bring in prohibition if they are elected in the upcoming elections. Do the young people think this will solve the problem? "I don't believe they will go through with prohibition," says Kalai, "because the Tamil Nadu Government gets huge revenue from liquor sales [over 30% of the State's revenue according to the latest figures]. "If the government stops selling alcohol, people will find another way to get it, definitely." Prohibition may also lead to people setting up illegal distilleries and the deaths of those who drink this low-quality liquor.

The young people are under no illusion about the scale of the task before them. "It is a huge problem but we must do our best," says Savitri. "It's not easy to stop them, it will be a long process but at least we have made a beginning. Never before has there been an organised attempt to stop drinking in this village. And we are confident that we can make a difference. That is why we call ourselves 'nammal mudiyam' - the 'we can' project."

Breaking another barrier

In fact, there was another 'we can' aspect to this alcohol-awareness day. It was the first time that young women from the village were on stage to participate in the skit and to introduce the speakers.

"This was radical," says Bridget, "because post-puberty girls are not encouraged to go on stage." She explains they were all having a discussion one night about the difference between boys and girls and the girls were saying it is not so easy for them. In the village, they are expected to behave in a certain way and not do what boys do.

"It was a big step for girls to go on stage," affirms Savitri. "But we thought, why can't we change this? It's not easy to be a girl in this society, so why can't we make this step?"

"I was the first girl to say I would go on stage," says Poovizhi, Bhuvana's sister. "At first, the other girls thought if they did it in our own village, people would tease them, so they would only do it in another village. But then Umaramaman told them, if you all do this, more women will get the confidence to do it; you will create a path for them. And they realised they wanted to break something and joined me to perform and make a big change. We asked Kumari, Murugabadi's wife to act. At first, she refused but we explained to her that we have to bring a change. Finally, she accepted to play the major role since her brother has also been affected by alcohol."

"Through this drama we highlighted not only alcohol but also emphasised the need for equality for women. I think I am just a soul, not a man or woman, and I have been given a body for this soul. So I can also do what boys do."

How did the audience react?

"Before the play we thought it would create a problem," says Savitri, "that people would say 'how dare you stand up there?' We were worried, but the opposite happened. Afterwards, people said what we did was very good."

"They looked very confident and respectable," says Bridget, "they were beautiful in their saris. And they played a key role in one of the most dramatic moments of the evening."



Another use for an alcohol bottle

When the domestic violence scene was being shown on stage, we arranged to stop the play and the Poovizhi and Savitri came forward and addressed the audience directly.

"Poovizhi said, 'Look, what alcoholism is doing to our families. Our mothers are facing such distress; is this the 'gift' they get after marriage? Why are they facing this problem?' Savitri answers, 'We have to give equal rights to women and respect them to get a better society. We can make a change; women can take a step. We can!'"

"It's really changed something," confirms Bhuvana. "Before the alcohol-awareness day, we asked more girls to participate in future programmes, but nobody came forward. But after seeing the drama, many of them asked us to call them when we do the next programme because they would like to take part."

"Many people participated in making this programme a success," says Poovizhi. "They included people from the Kamban team, Jayabharathy from *Reach for the Stars* and people from our village. We would like to thank *Stichting De Zaaier* for the funding, the many Auroville groups who helped us, the health speakers from AA and the Pondicherry Government hospital and, most of all, Sridhar and the *Yatra* team for all their dedication and support."

The flier for the alcohol-awareness day in the village included the famous quote from Goethe: *Whatever you can do or dream you can; begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.*

The youth of Edayanchavady have obviously taken it to heart.

Alan

If you like to know more or support this work, please contact thamarai@auroville.org.in