

Thamarai: the lotus blooms again

Thamarai, which means 'lotus' in Tamil, is an Auroville educational and health project in the bioregion. There were challenges in 2016 when the Thamarai centre had to shut down in Edayanchavady. What is the status of the project now?

Thamarai was founded in 2006 by Bridget Horkan and Kathy Walking to collaborate with villages in Auroville's bioregion aspiring to further the values of full potential, well-being and empowerment for all. On the ground, this meant programmes in education and health, with a particular emphasis on capacity building of local volunteers.

for an after-school facility. Thamarai was also approached by a friend who had some space to offer in Annai Nagar. "We were offered a temporary, rent free, place for after-school, so we quickly took the opportunity to begin a new chapter, taking the learning from the previous experience of building strong community connections through a village support committee," says Bridget.

Even though Annai Nagar is a small

curricular activities. Once a week, students practice stick dance, a folk dance known to improve concentration. They have Silambam classes every Sunday, a traditional martial art that originated in Tamil Nadu at least 2,000 years ago. And with the Kalvi project, children use drawings and patterns to make games.

Thamarai is also partnering with Udavi School on an early childhood programme. Every child who attends the Thamarai Playgroup programme is assured a place in Udavi School. The Playgroup curriculum, managed by Maliga, is designed to provide holistic development of a child, including sensory-motor skills and psycho-social development. The Playgroup currently has 32 children from Edayanchavady and other neighbouring villages.

Realising the value of empowering the local community, the project has enrolled a group of 12 local facilitators who take care of the day-to-day functioning of the centre and conduct classes for



Bridget and Muthukumari, the Thamarai Coordinators



Conducting healing sessions with women

The first project was started in Edayanchavady, one of the neighbouring villages with a playgroup and after school. A year later, an all-day free healing centre was added for the villagers along with regular yoga therapy sessions. In the evening, between 60 and 90 children would come for homework help, English language learning, and computer classes. "When we started our projects in this village, the youth of the village were the first to step forward to help us. We established the system of graduates being coached as facilitators," says Bridget, co-founder and coordinator of the Thamarai Learning Centre.

When the occupancy of the building that housed the project was challenged in 2016, Thamarai decided to close the project in its current form. The play group remained in Udavi School and it was decided to support the older children through computer and health programmes in the government school.

Just after the shutting down of the centre in Edayanchavady, villagers from Annai Nagar, a nearby Dalit village, requested support from Auroville



Yoga at the Government Higher Secondary School, Koot Road

settlement of about 1,500 people, the programme has high attendance. Around 60 students attend the after-school programme that runs from Monday to Saturday. Like in the earlier project at Edayanchavady, the new project focusses on providing guidance for homework, English classes and digital literacy lessons. But the new project has an additional dimension of extra-

children. Three of these facilitators had the opportunity in 2018 to take part in the Anveshan youth exchange programmes in various parts of India. Shubhlaxmi, a volunteer from Annai Nagar, says that facilitating in after-school has improved her fluency in English and exposed her to new concepts and general knowledge. The effect is rubbing off on the children. "Before, if someone from Auroville, especially someone from abroad, spoke to the village children, they would hesitate," she says. "After the after-school has come to our village, our children are more exposed to different cultures and more familiar with English."

The training of the local facilitators does not stop with English and computers. A leadership programme is being implemented as well. Bridget explains: "Six years ago, Monica Sharma introduced us to a programme and practice called Stewardship for New Emergence. This programme builds capacity and leadership and supports each participant to design effective and

sustainable projects in many different sectors. We aim to train the youth and children through the same courses, so that there is effective change in their village development."

Thamarai children have been trained using the tools of stewardship and have designed projects that focus on water and waste management, education and sports development, and overall wellbeing in the village. In affiliation with Yatra Arts Media and supported by funding from the 50th Anniversary fund, a group of children have been trained in filmmaking so that they can make their own films and raise awareness about social issues. Thamarai recently received co-stewardship of a plot of land in the village, which is now being developed into a sports ground. "The youth and children are working together on the design and layout, on what they need and how it can be done, all using the tools taught in the stewardship programme," says Bridget.

What about the health programme that had run successfully in Edayanchavady? "After the healing centre shut down in the village, I thought of engaging with more villages and reaching many more people by designing a mobile health programme," says Muthukumari, the programme co-ordinator. The mobile health programme

to support the people of the bioregion to be responsible for the well-being of their villages. So we trained the women to take these attitudes into their own communities. Some of the women have started their own yoga classes in their villages," says Muthukumari. Alcoholism continues to be a huge problem in the villages, and Thamarai has started conducting counselling sessions with the help of experienced professionals and de-addiction practitioners.

Thamarai has overcome the hurdle of being shut down in one location and has emerged stronger. The real strength of the programme lies in the empowerment of local youth. Praba Haran, a software engineer from Edayanchavady village, is one of the current Thamarai volunteers. "For me, Thamarai has been a way of realising my capacity and skills, and letting me build a positive character," he says. "I want to share what I have learnt in all these years, from being one of the children in the programme when it was started in my village to now when I support the children of another village."

Poovizhi wasn't able to join Thamarai as a student. "I used to hear about children dancing, singing and interacting with international volunteers. But the centre was too far from my home," she says ruefully. "I wanted to



Homework help at the evening after-school programme



Children learning film making

now reaches several government schools, where sessions are conducted on healthy lifestyle and yoga.

Eighty-nine women working in Auroville units have been trained in yoga and healing through herbal remedies in a six-month programme in 2018 supported with funding from Stichting De Zaaier. "The vision of our projects is

learn and explore abilities beyond academics and also work on social issues." Now, while pursuing a degree in software engineering, she has become a facilitator in Thamarai.

It is they – Praba, Poovizhi, Shubhlaxmi and so many others – who will make sure the lotus continues to bloom.

Mitali

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Editorial team:

Alan, Carel, Manas. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

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