

Annual Review 2020-21



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While every year is unusual from the year before, 2020 will stand out for the magnitude of disruptions that happened in the lives of many people, institutions, and activities. For a fledging organisation like Thulir, the impact was worse and challenges remained high. The optimism generated after the inauguration of the new school campus in January 2019 took a hit and it was left to the teachers to build again from the scratch. The pandemic also exposed the myopic focus of the Government in prioritising exam-centric and higher education over basic education. As I write this report in the last week of February, the Government is yet announce the way forward for schools to be re-opened. The Government has only allowed resumption of classes from 9-12 in schools, as they are oriented towards examinations and certifications. The damage caused to the students in lower classes can be significant and affect the future of many students. This does not seem to be a priority for the Government.

Sittlingi valley was largely free from COVID. The local community enforced strict controls through social distancing, quarantining people who visit places outside the valley, and promptly isolating anyone who showed symptoms of COVID. However, the economic impact was substantial. Amidst the doom and gloom in the valley due to job losses, teachers in Thulir stood up as a beacon of hope for many children. The teachers went out to different villages and organised classes to keep the students engaged at least twice a week. After Pongal, students were allowed to visit the school informally for clearing doubts, exchanging books and materials, and general interactions with teachers.

The expenses of Thulir supported by Asha Bangalore is largely towards the salaries of teachers. In many of the teachers' families, the salaries helped them to sail through the tough times, as there were loss of income in families.

During the year, Asha Bangalore initiated an effort to raise funds for construction of Dining Hall in the school campus. During the initial lock down, many construction workers returned back to the villages and could not find employment. The project was to help continue the construction activities in school that may provide employment for these workers. While we could not raise sufficient funds for the dining hall, our effort helped in constructing a store room .

Stories from Thulir were documented in a fiction for the first time. Priti David, an editor with People's Archive of Rural India (PARI), wrote a short novel based on the stories that she listened from the students at Thulir. Asha Bangalore also invited Priti to present the book to a larger audience.

Site visit during the year looked like a distant dream in the initial days. For the first time, Asha Bangalore organised a meeting with the teachers from Thulir through video conferencing. In February, when the COVID cases was waning, I managed to do my first site visit to Thulir in over a year. During my stay, Anjana made a flying visit to Thulir in her inimitable style.

As always, Thulir kept us updated on their activities through their engaging newsletters - <http://www.thulir.org/wp/2020/06/newsletter-jan-june20/> and <http://www.thulir.org/wp/2020/12/newsletter-jul-dec20/>

De-centralised Classes

The first three months of the lockdown resulted in total inaction. Thulir started functioning in June 2020 with teachers coming to school on few days a week. The initial months were largely spent on training themselves and finding ways to reach out to students. The possibility of online school that was in vogue in urban India was completely ruled out due to connectivity issues (they never had landline connections or 4G towers in the vicinity) and lack of devices. The initiative by Government to start a Television Channel to broadcast lessons were not received well by students. It was then some of the teachers suggested that they can visit the nearby villages, where the students and teachers hail from, and conduct classes in open public spaces like temples, trees, and others. To ensure minimal risk of COVID spreading, the teachers chose open areas, maintained social distancing, and used masks while visiting the villages. Also, if any of them show symptoms of COVID, they avoided the classes entirely.

Decentralised classes were organised in the following villages - Rettakuttai, Thanda, S. Thathampatti, Kil Thanda, Mel Thanda,



Balakuttai, and in different parts of Sittlingi village. The teachers carry their lunches and spent the entire day, twice every week.

I visited the classes in two of the villages - Rettakuttai and S. Thathampatti, both located about 6 Kms from Sittlingi. In both places, the school was set up under a big tamarind tree in the village providing a natural setting for children to learn and play. It reminded of the vision of Rabindranath Tagore to establish Shantiniketan under the trees.

She is our own, the darling of our hearts, Santiniketan.

In the shadows of her trees we meet

in the freedom of her open sky.

Our dreams are rocked in her arms.

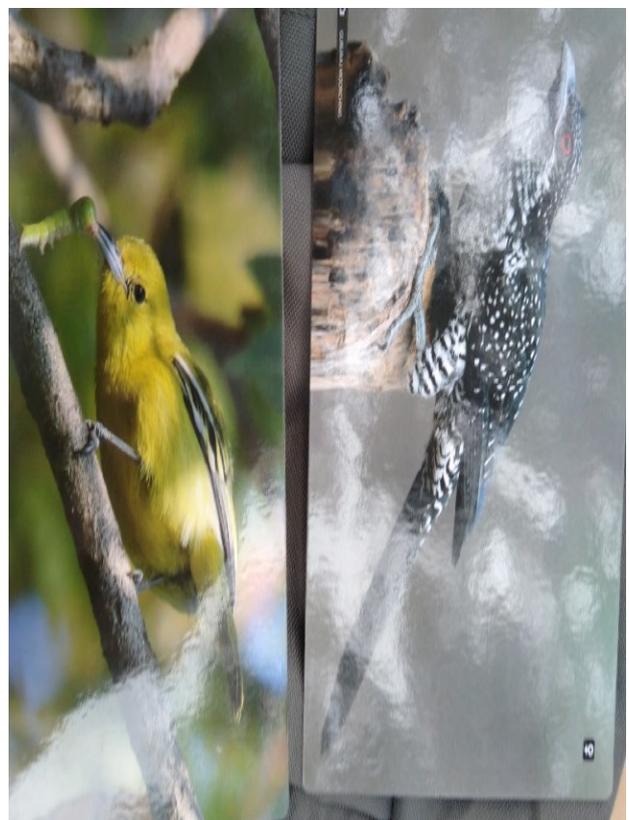
Her face is a fresh wonder of love every time we see her,

for she is our own, the darling of our hearts.



These schools were not limited to students studying in Thulir alone. It was open to all children in the village who were interested. Chintamani hails from Rettakuttai, and on the day of my visit, she was helped by Rajamma, who brought with her, learning materials in the form of flash cards, story cards, drawing and painting materials and worksheets for Children. There were about 15 children on the day I visited. The numbers were inconsistent and usually range between 10-30 depending on various factors, including distractions in the form of television programs, work in fields, sickness, and others. One of the children showed me her painting of Indian flag and another one explained a story using the story cards.

The story cards and flash cards looked handy for teachers to share interesting stories in an attractive manner. The students were intrigued by these cards and shared the cards among themselves to learn more about what is displayed in the cards.



The next village school was at S. Thathampatti, where Jeevila hails from. Sasi joined her with learning materials brought from the school. There were about 20 children, and few of them were from Thulir, who promptly recognised me. The activities were very similar to the other school and they were engaged in learning maths using stones and other material that they can get their hand on.



The safety precautions were well in place with all teachers sporting masks and maintaining distance. The concept certainly seems to provide temporary relief to the current situation. It is effective in ensuring that the students have some form of continuity in learning. It certainly cannot replicate the physical classroom but looks a better alternative to online classes.

Construction Update

After witnessing the jubilation on inauguration day at the new campus, it was certainly depressing for me to see the empty school during this visit. The construction activities continued in the usual pace. In July, Asha Bangalore initiated an effort to raise funds for building a dining hall and a store room in the school campus. Asha Bangalore was also supported by Asha Irvine in this effort. It was done to help the local artisans who had returned back home due to

lockdown. However, construction work in most parts of Tamil Nadu picked up steam from September and some of the workers returned to their worksites. Meanwhile, we could not raise sufficient funds and the amount raised was utilised in building the room to store construction and maintenance materials. Thulir also raised funding (on their own) to start constructing staff quarters in the school. Despite the prices of building materials sky-rocketing, the construction activities remained active, engaging local materials and artisans to the fullest extent. The construction activities ensured continuity of employment for the artisans engaged with Thulir.



Coming Home

Karadi Tales, in association with People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) released a set of 5 books focusing on stories from Rural India. One of them, 'Coming Home', written by Priti David was based on the stories that she heard from students from Thulir basic technology program. Being a piece of fiction, Priti had taken the liberty to mix the stories of many children in one and present a beautiful cocktail of many stories in a single story. While reading it, it looked to me as a story of none and yet a story of everyone.

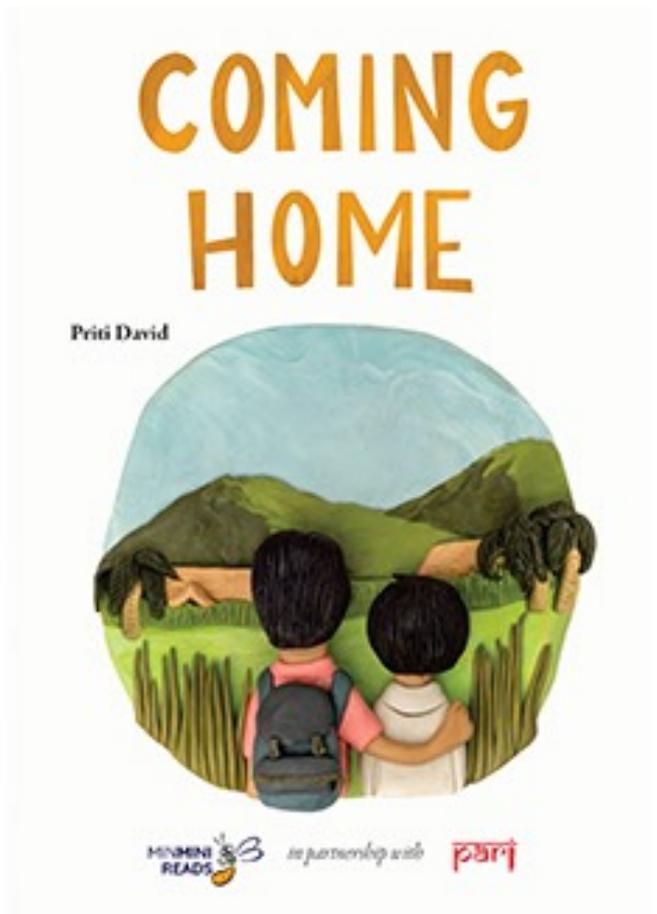
Asha Bangalore invited Priti David to share her thoughts and ideas behind the book with our volunteers and donors. It was a wonderful

evening listening to her experience and what inspired her to write the book.

The session has been archived and can be viewed here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghyMOPsZUro>

Meeting over Video Conferencing

Volunteers from Asha Bangalore met up with the staff at Thulir over video conferencing on October 11, 2020. The program started with general introduction of both teams. Anu provided an update on the situation in the village back then and apprised us about the decentralised classes that they have been organising in various villages. They also highlighted the challenges that they face in internet connection, rains, electricity, and misconceptions about the pandemic. We also discussed the impact of pandemic on the social and economic fronts. Issues like early marriages for girls, lack of nutritional food for children (in the absence of mid-day meals), disturbances due to alcoholism, joblessness, challenges in agriculture, were discussed. Questions were raised on the limited Government support during pandemic. Despite token initiatives like distributing additional 5Kgs of rice to children in lieu of midday meals or Rs. 1000 as a scholarship amount for girl students (to avoid dropping out), there is a long way back for these marginalised communities to fully emerge out of the pandemic.



Staff Update

During the year, Shaktivel got married and relocated himself to Bangalore. It was an end of a long standing association with Thulir, first as a student of Basic Technology program, then as a teacher handling the evening program, and later as the admin staff at Thulir. Lakshmi was on maternity leave for large parts of the year and she was blessed with a baby boy. Thulir has added another teacher in G. Sureshkumar. Suresh hails from Palakkuttai village but has grown mostly outside, as his father worked with the Railways. He holds an M.A in English with a B.Ed degree and got married recently.

Meeting with Teachers

It has been a tough year for many teachers on their personal front too. All their families rely on the income of two individuals and invariably, the income of their spouses was affected badly. One of them was a craftsman weaving baskets and orders dropped to zero during the pandemic; another family had a flower garden and there were no takers for flowers during lockdown leading to significant loss of income. The spouse of another teacher suffered pay-cut in the private dairy where he was working. Overall, It has resulted in increased debt levels among villagers and they end up paying exorbitant interest. Even those who managed to find some work had to perform when the spread of COVID was at its peak. Since the information about the pandemic was hazy even for educated folks, they were further confused with a mix of poor information and paranoia. They have to travel at least 80 Km to reach Dharmapuri for COVID tests and treatment. Some of them have older children and saw them struggle with online classes, affected by lack of adequate devices and poor connectivity. One of the teacher's daughter had to travel three kms everyday to get access to phone network.

Amidst this background, visiting school was more than just a solace in the initial days. They decided to use the time to learn and enhance their skills. They found new ways to reach out to children and communicate to them, the 'Decentralised Classes' being one such idea. This was also the time for them to reflect on their teaching methods and find more conviction about the purpose of running schools like Thulir. The Government schools did not function and the initiative to conduct classes through television resembled a news reading session for many. The private schools in the towns nearby took no additional efforts to reach out to children. Since teachers of Thulir happens to reside locally, they were quick to come up with solutions and help the students.

This was also a time for them to reflect on lives and make course correction for the future. One teacher expressed that they should reduce eating outside and eat more home-grown food. Another teacher suggested that it helped to follow more hygiene in their daily routines. Reducing visits to functions and indulging in extravagance were other learnings from the pandemic for some of the teachers.

The pandemic has certainly the changed the lives of many. It certainly calls for more empathy from those who were fortunate to retain good health and wealth. The social divide between the rich and the poor has increased more than a year ago. It is here institutions like Thulir serve as a bridge for many to contribute and support the marginalised communities.