

# Site Visit Report

January 2023

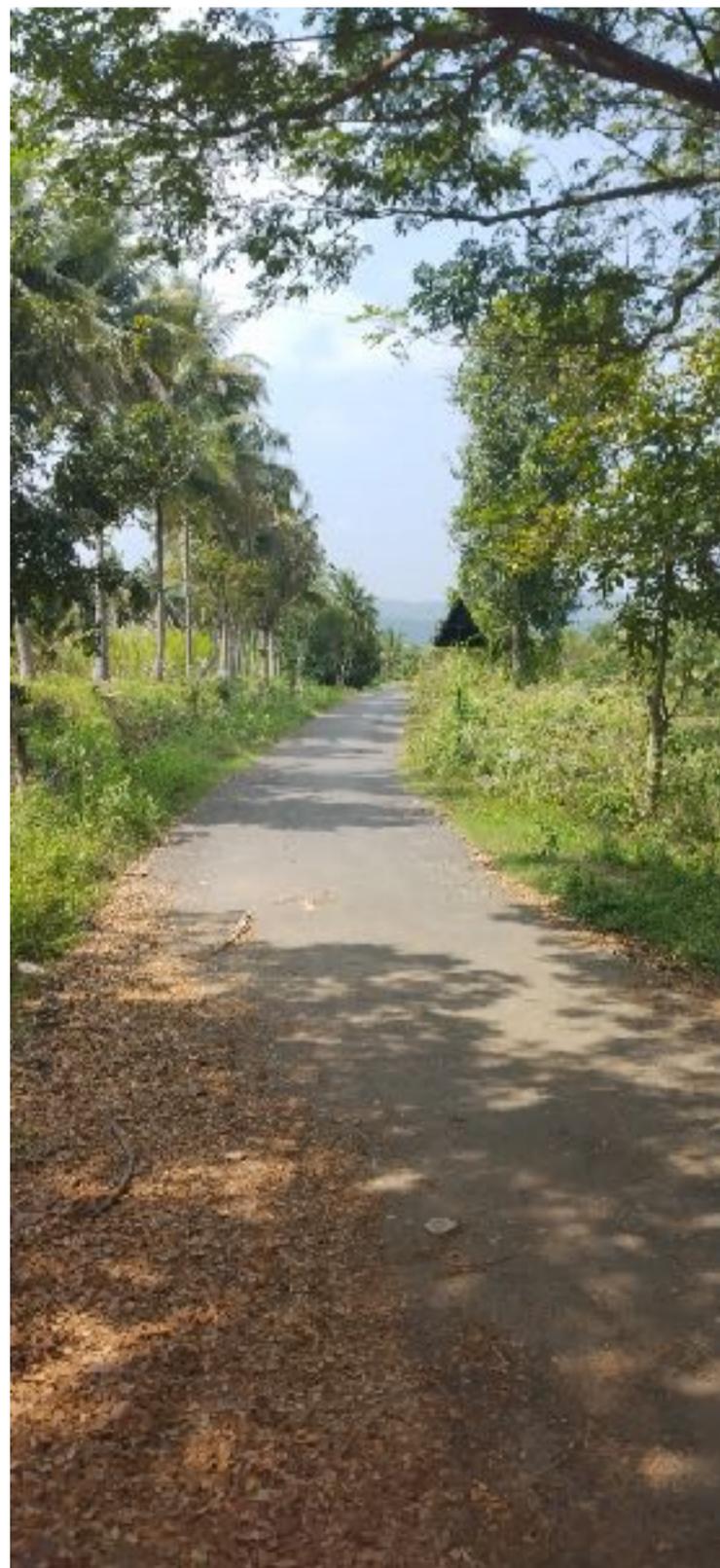
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I visited Thulir between January 3–5, 2023. This was my first visit to Thulir since February 2021, and the first in what can be called as post-COVID era. I was welcomed by a recently laid tarmac road that leads to the school from the main road – A good example of



BEFORE



AFTER

collaborative effort with the local panchayat. I was on time for lunch at Thulir, and relished having it in the recently constructed Dining Hall. The lunches at Thulir deserve special appreciation – simple and nutritious. On most of the days, the lunch is made with

locally grown millets. Vegetables have to be procured given that only limited varieties are available locally. Parents of Children also support the kitchen with produce from their farms. The changing food habits elsewhere have also reached children (as well as teachers) in the villages. They have easily taken up the 'fast food' culture that is widely available. The efforts at Thulir to provide nutritious food is certainly laudable, and many felt the impact during the closure of school during COVID times in not only students, but also teachers. The lunch over the next two days included millets like Thinai (finger millet), Kambu (Pearl millet), and Ragi.

In 2021, the school was not functioning from the current premises at that time due to COVID regulations. In effect, I have not met most of the children since early 2020, and three years is a long time for me to remember and recognise, given their age. Yet, one of the older kids (about 10 years) surprised me by remembering my previous visit in cycle with emphasis on hand pump that I carry during tours!

## Admission

Thulir continued with their open admission system. The number of applicants saw an improvement following the closure of the nearby private school at Kottapatti, 11 Kms from Sittlingi. Given that this was the first full year in the post-COVID era, Thulir was careful in not adding too many students. They also have to address the learning gaps due to absence of regular classes during COVID. The

total number of students catered to is 58 students, which includes 2 children with special needs. The classes are structured based on their learning abilities, even if they are assigned classes based on their age group for official purposes. The students were chosen to ensure representation from all the communities in the region.

# Learning Gaps due to COVID

Most teachers feel the absence of contact classes has hindered the progress of students. In spite of initiatives like decentralised schools, most students have difficulties in coping with the expected learning outcomes. It is not clear if the teachers adopt any specific measure to analyse the gaps. Presently, the focus is more on the students who will be leaving the school next year to join elsewhere. They are keen on getting these students prepared for further classes.

On the other hand, teachers observe better social skills and improved general awareness in some of the younger children who have been engaged by their parents in agriculture or other household work in this time period. However such development cannot be considered universal as students had varying access to digital devices and the financial situation of families.

# Class Visits

I limited my class visits to classes with senior students. In one of the classes, the students were asked to write about their experiences from the recent vacation. One child wrote about his experience of playing carrom board and painted the picture below. Another child wrote about her visits to different places, and her picture was that of her mom sitting by a lake. The third wrote about playing hop-and-skip with her friends. As someone who enjoys reading (and writing too) travelogues, I was intrigued by their observations and detailed descriptions.



Illustration of Carrom Board

One student arrived late for the class and enquired from his friend if the assembly was held in the morning. He was relieved to know that it will be held after lunch. The assembly sessions are eagerly looked for by the students, and it can be said that they are punctual to school to make it for those sessions. The main challenge for their punctuality is accessibility to the school from



different villages. Some of them rely on their parents; a few others have joined together to organise a vehicle to drop the kids and so on.

I attended the assembly session after lunch. The children were practicing for the upcoming cultural fest to be showcased in front of parents and friends the following week. All the students are involved in the program as everyone was given an opportunity to perform.

## Outreach

Apart from the school work, teachers continued their outreach activities in their villages. Suresh, who was active with the decentralised school in his village, continued his engagement with students in the evening. He was instrumental in taking some of the senior students to Payir for a career counselling session. He also

organises training program in long distance running with assistance from Santhosh in Runners' High.

Thulir continued their engagement with the Illam Thedi Kalvi program initiated by Tamil Nadu Government. They continued training youngsters chosen under this program, as and when approached. Thulir was also involved in consultative discussions on State Education Policy as well as the newly launched scheme – Ennum Ezhuthum which aims is to ensure foundational Literacy and Numeracy by 2025.

## Construction Update

In 2020, Asha Bangalore and Asha Irvine raised funds (partly) for the construction of Dining Hall in Thulir campus. The construction was completed in mid-2021 and was in place when the school reopened in late 2021.

In 2020, Thulir also added one house and a guest room, as a part of staff quarters on the campus (not funded by Asha). Presently, the staff quarters houses Kaavya, Mallesh, and their son. Kaavya, previously a software engineer, has started volunteering with Thulir. She is not included in the staff roster as yet.

Foundation has been laid for the construction of new library building. However, the immediate priority is to ensure compliance of the school campus in accordance with the DTCP norms. Since, this is the first time that any school in rural area is approaching DTCP for approval, there are plenty of ambiguities in their norms.

Thulir has tweaked some of the buildings to fulfil the requirements as presented to them from time to time.



Photos of Dining Hall

## Discussions with Anu

I had wide ranging discussions with Anu over many topics surrounding the school, the village, the expectations of parents, teachers, students, donors, etc., and others. The role of an

institution like school is more than just to provide education to the students. It can also help in bringing changes in their parents, and society in general. Of course, education still remains the primary reason.

The perception over education and school has significantly changed in the village since 2004 due to various reasons. Today, parents are keen, not just to enrol their children in school, but take keen interest in seeing their progress. It is here that teachers are questioned on various aspects, including the methodology of teaching. Anu finds these discussions encouraging, even if there are challenges in addressing some of their expectations

The development of teachers is one of the main areas focused by Anu. Most of the teachers have been around for the last 4–5 years or more, and their roles are expanding not only in the school, but also in their social circles. Some of the teachers have been vocal on various social issues at different points of time leading to positive changes in the villages. Their initiative to organise decentralised schools has been received well in their respective villages and enhanced the reputation of the teachers.

The registration of school has been an on-going challenge. She is well assisted by Ram on this front who has been tirelessly working to untangle the complexities in getting the task done. They are assured that the delay in registration would not hinder their work in the immediate future. The process has been a punishment though.

Role of Ambika – Ambika has been recruited again from last year, this time to take care of two children with special needs. One of the children has started attending regular classes with additional help from Ambika. Anu is also happy to see other children accepting these two children in their classes.

Anu also provided me with an update on the students who have passed out from Thulir over the past few years. Complete details are available in the annexe to this report.

## Meeting with Teachers

I met the teachers separately and discussed about their work and challenges. Most are keen on up skill and are happy with the opportunities provided. I outlined the funding model of Asha for Education and the expectations from AfE. I also emphasised on maintaining regular reports of their work that would help in improving their work and also sharing their work with others for learning and feedback.

### **Suggested further reading:**

1. Thulir Blogs/News Letter – <http://www.thulir.org/wp/blog/>

# Annexure – Details of Thulir Alumni

(As provided by Anu. Names and some details have been changed to protect their identities.)

## **[Dhairya and Dhanya] – Confidence in their learning curve:**

Studying in a Kendriya Vidyalaya school in one of the big cities of Tamil Nadu. They are doing very well not only in Academics but in all other activities. What was most heartening for me with these two girls was when they were confronted with the fact that they suddenly had to learn Hindi in this school that too, class 6 level Hindi. They were quite undisturbed and said very confidently, " I just have to learn it. That's all! That I can do. No problem. " That is the objective of Thulir. Give children the courage and confidence to learn new things. One never knows what the future will unfold! We cannot teach them the contents of the future. we can only give them the tools and confidence to face the unknown and learn!

And they were not at all upset that their Hindi performance was worse or slower than their classmates the first term or so. ( Being a Thulir student, the competition bug had not yet touched them! ) From the second year their performance in Hindi has been as good or better ( in the case of [Dhanya]) than their classmates. Both of them are class leaders etc.

## **[Varenya] – Left hander self assurance:**

Was put in a boarding school in a small town. She was very homesick for the first term. She is left handed and in Thulir, this was completely ok. But in the new school some teachers forced her to write with her right hand. She complained to her father saying that this was not right and persuaded

him to talk to the principal and got permission to use her left hand. She excels in academics and is now in class 9 but she has become a little quiet.

### **[Sainath & Kishore] Unafraid to ask questions:**

When [Sainath & Kishore] first joined the government high school in the village, the teachers used to complain to our teachers that they were not showing 'respect' to elders! We thought that was because of our children not being used to calling us as 'sir' or 'madam'. Only later we realised that it was actually because these children would fearlessly ask doubts or question the teacher when they made mistakes. One doesn't know how long this courage to question would last!

### **[Arav, Harish, Gajanana and Garima] – Remaining connected to Thulir, Needing concepts explained & not having opportunities for dance**

The four joined the same government school subsequently. [Arav, Harish & Gajanana] are doing very well academically. Garima had some problems for the first 6 months especially with commuting by the public bus to school and putting up with eve teasing by the older boys on the bus. We have been interacting with her and helping her with all this. She struggles a little academically as concepts are never taught and rote learning has never been easy for her. She is a good dancer but there is no opportunity for that in the government school. She comes to Thulir whenever there is a dance workshop here. All of them come to Thulir very often and get help both with academics and other issues.

### **[Bhavana] – Prioritizing wellbeing:**

[Bhavana] did the entrance exam and reading test and cleared both to get admission in a central government model school. She did very well academically but the hostel facilities were abysmal. There were hardly any

usable bathrooms. Her parents felt that her wellbeing was more important than academic achievement and took her off school! (Obviously Thulir has been influencing some parents too.! ) She then joined a private School closely associated with Thulir, mid way through the academic year but adjusted quickly to the new school, friends and staying on her own in the campus.

**[Kalaivani] – Feeling the injustice of hierarchy:**

[Kalaivani] has joined class 8 in a private school in a nearby city. She had no problems academically but she finds the manner in which the hostel wardens scold and treat children very difficult to tolerate. She wants to change schools next year.

**[Anette and Anjelica] – East adjustment to new environment:**

They have joined a private school in a village, 25 km from Sittilingi. They commute in the school van every day. Both have adjusted very quickly without any problems and are doing well. They still take part in all the events in Thulir.

**[Preethi] – Staying connected:**

[Preethi] is in a government hostel and school in a town close to Sittilingi and is doing well. Comes occasionally to Thulir whenever she has holidays.

**[Vandana] – Taking initiative in planning for her own transitions:**

[Vandana] has joined class 7 in a school affiliated to the ideals of J. Krishnamurthy schools. She too was homesick the first month but has adjusted well and is in fact blooming in all activities. This is also an alternative school and has a good mix of academics, sports, craft, art, music and dance. [Vandana] is doing very well. She too had to suddenly

learn class 7 Hindi and Sanskrit and Telugu. She planned for it well before going, ordered the necessary books online by herself and kept pestering all her cousins and all of us at every opportunity to teach her weeks before going. She took initiative for her own learning.

Thulir is following the unique journeys of each young human being and are in contact with all our old students and continue to mentor them.