

Pathashaala - The Vallipuram Project of The School

"The school would be one and work from two campuses, Adyar and Vallipuram, Urban and Rural"

From the minutes of the Executive Committee, 28 Feb 2005

The School with its very special location and even more special circumstances of creation and relocation, grew quickly from a small school in Poes Gardens for primary school children to a full fledged +2 ISC school by 1987 in Damodar Gardens, tall trees, small children, an old building from British times. The Vallipuram project grew out of this journey of The School, a journey of exploration in education, a possibility for the future.

A rural extension - 1995 - Kilapakkam

In 1992, staff members of The School visited Sholinganallur Children's Garden School Farm. Many voiced that it would be good for the school to have a farm. In discussion, teachers who had been long years in school expressed this wish for creating an educational opportunity for students that integrated rural reality.

We had heard that Krishnamurti wanted a 100 acre piece of land for The School before it moved to Damodar Gardens. We started looking for 100 acres, we found 16, the Kilapakkam farm about 70 Km from Adyar. KFI decided to acquire this property in 1995. Students visits started immediately - and the year we acquired this farm, there were good rains and all 30 tamarind trees fruited for the first time!

This was the time of a heightened environmental movement. An Environmental Education Course was started for Class VII in 1993. Many of us read The Walkabout Papers by Maurice Gibbons and wondered if a meaningful threshold could be designed for our senior-most students. The redefined programme for class XI grew out of this exploration in 1997. We also developed the first exam certified course in Environmental Science for Classes XI and XII.

Vallipuram

The Vallipuram land was brought to our notice in 2000. Many trustees and teachers saw the land and all considered it suitable for future development. We were not ready to start any educational work except camps by students.

KFI could complete the purchase of land in 2006 at a total cost of under Rs 30 Lakhs.

During purchase process we learnt that land could be owned by KFI only if it was to be used for a school. Slowly, we homed in on the idea of a small residential school for 120 students. Vallipuram became the opportunity to craft a school from scratch.

The School was always focussed on student well being. Food, games, emotional health, reflection, lifestyle and a rhythm of life contribute to this. For students the daily immersion in two realities, school and the world outside, creates its own tensions. Parents struggle to bridge the two. Which is real? Is the world of truth, values, dignity and equality, real? or is the jostling, in your face, combative, profit at any cost real?

Would there be value if students, in their adolescence, had a place where the values and atmosphere could be sustained, for a while, without the daily living in two worlds? Would it possibly strengthen and nourish a young person, if he / she were to be in a residential context? Would some shelter from the winds help the saplings grow stronger? Would redefining the educational setting, like our sister schools Rishi Valley, Rajghat and Sahyadri, have something to offer? The 3 week stay experiences for Class 11 students at Kilapakkam gave energy to these questions. Vallipuram was first thought of for the most senior students.

Pathashaala - the residential wing of The school

The thoughts of teachers shaped into proposals which the Executive Committee and KFI subjected to two rigorous reviews. Changes were made in these proposals. A committee steered the Vallipuram project. Slowly Vallipuram grew, so slowly that we almost did not notice. Many contributions made it possible for the campus to grow, slowly, organically.

The Class XI Programme - 1997

In 1997, through the confluence of many individual initiatives by the staff of The School, a redefined programme for Class 11 was created. At the threshold of Class 11, students were offered a programme that included choice of subjects, Environmental Science for the first time, and 3 distinct trips.

- to 'understand the world we live in'*
- to a place of quiet, to be with the beauty of nature.*
- to spend 3 weeks in Kilapakkam, learning about rural reality and about living and being together.*

Teachers travelled from Chennai to handle the academics. Walks in the village, cooking, washing clothes, interacting with the Kilapakkam school, playing with the adolescents there, and later, other projects there, amplified their understanding of social reality.

This programme lasted till the groundwater in Kilapakkam fell and could no longer support 25 students for 3 weeks. Kaigal (which was then part of the 'Being with Nature' trip) similarly dropped off since the stay became increasingly difficult due to tourist activity. These situations caused the redefinition of the class XI Programme.

Our architect conceptualized buildings with *wardha* tumbler roofing and brick domes after examining various approaches. Learning spaces and laboratories, two blocks of student residences, dining hall & kitchen and staff housing were constructed in phase 1. By 2011 4 more student residences, administration and library blocks will be readied. This phase is being constructed by Centre of Science for Villages (CSV), Wardha. The cost of the full project will be less than the price of 60 ft x 40 ft land in Chennai.

The School has its moorings in honesty and truth rather than a quick fix at any cost. Vallipuram grew in 10 years and not in 2. The statutory permissions have taken longer. Most people cannot understand this way of functioning. "What is the use of a new campus, a new school, if we cannot do it honestly?" At every turn of the project this question came to haunt us. Krishnamurti's words "*Don't be corrupt.*" were beacons.

Pathashaala at Vallipuram is a bird of hope. Is it possible in today's world to function in a manner that is integral, transparent, without any corruption? Is it possible to speak a language that is consistent with the principles that the school is founded upon? Can we say to the future generations, it was possible to build this place without corrupt foundations? Vallipuram is a social exploration as much as an educational and environmental one. It is an attempt to apply the values, approaches and practices embedded in the running of The School.

Padmaji, a founder of The School, on Friday 1 Sep, two days before she passed away, after watching the Junior sports events, spent many hours discussing the nuances of the project at Vallipuram. She wondered if the Krishnamurti study would be up by 17 February 2007!

Pathashaala got off to a small start on 19 August 2010 in a mixed age classroom with 14 students and 3 teachers. Ramesh and Uma moved from Chennai. Sampath spends substantial time in Pathashaala. Gautama divides his time between The School and Pathashaala. All other staff are from the villages nearby.

Water, wind and vast distances for the eyes characterize Pathashaala. Organic rice has been grown there since 2003 and this is the rice all at The School have been eating daily. The educational rhythm includes the cycles of agriculture, the storks, pond herons and the large number of birds, reptiles and deer that visit the campus. It is a wild place and yet holds a strange serenity.

The School has made many good movements. Vallipuram emerged as a rural nursery where these discoveries and ideas could be given a soil for germination. Passive solar cooling, Solar lighting, solar cooking, dry toilets, LED lights, L shaped classrooms.

The School in Chennai, with as day boarding programme and a residential programme in Vallipuram - each supporting the other, were envisaged as parallel movements.

Outreach Possibilities

Thanks to the work of many teachers of The School, Outreach has made major impact on TN School education. The School has touched the lives of lakhs of children and thousands of teachers in the State of Tamilnadu. ABL Primary, ALM middle, ICDS, mobile lab, teacher education, text books have all received inputs to varying degrees from The School.

At the suggestion of SSA a model primary school for village children is planned on the Pathashaala campus. This opens the possibility of educating the urban and the rural children on the same campus, with the same care and approach. An ABL Resource Centre, an outdoor science and Eco-science Park are scheduled or germination in 2011. Tarit dreams of a Centre for Rural Design and Sumitra of a Post School programme and Careers Centre for rural youth. Revival of the '*Er*' systems in both Kilapakkam and Vallipuram villages have been thought of many years.

The Chennai Education Centre of KFI

In the 1970s the Madras Executive Committee was responsible for the school. Subsequently, in the 90s it was renamed as Executive Committee of The School. This was born of the perception that we have only a day school, and unlike other KFI centers. No growth was possible. In 2007 with the growth and expansion of activities, The Chennai Education Centre was thought of as one more Educational Centre of KFI - after Rishi Valley, Rajghat, Bangalore and Sahyadri.

The School, and its wings Outreach and Pathashaala make up this centre.

*No time was Pathashaala considered as a replacement for The School.
The minutes of the meetings and deliberations over the period 2001-10 consistently show this.*

G. Gautama
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