

Thulir Run October 29th – November 2nd, 2022– Journey to the heart!

"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart." -*Helen Keller*

Why run to Thulir?

Mani, Krishan, Chandra, and I have always liked to run long distances. This running we do is not about breaking records, showing the world what we are capable of, doing something superhuman, etc. Our running has always been about creating a larger meaning, enjoying the process, and inspiring/being inspired by others. Our goal for every year has been a target event that also raises funds for a cause and makes a true difference in lives on the ground. This year we chose to raise funds for Thulir and in our discussions with them, we realized that building a library for the school and helping many other government schools in the area was a real need. Instead of running to various other cities, locales, etc., we decided to run to Thulir itself, bringing everyone's attention to the cause and meeting the community that we want to involve with. The actual distance from Bangalore to Thulir was much lesser than 300km. But, a quirky idea to make it more "exciting" made us decide to chart a longer route to cover 300km to Thulir and run 50kms there. This also helped us plan stops at a friend's place and get proper hotel accommodation for the first two days. Unfortunately, Chandra was going through her recovery from injury issues and could not be part of the run itself. However, she was an integral part of the effort. Mani, Krishan, and I trained over many months slowly getting our bodies and mind used to back-to-back runs and staying for long hours on our feet. Some runs were done alone and some as a team. We went through many ups and downs in training getting valuable lessons on what our body is capable of and what it tells us. All of us went through one niggle or the other and even gut issues. Towards the actual run day though Krishan had to nurse a shin strain that was being treated by Susan, the physio. With her go ahead, the plan was to take it easy for Krishan. Nevertheless, we never let any of these get in the way of our determination to run for the cause. We handled each challenge with patience and calm.

Why Thulir?

Thulir is an Education Resource Centre for children and young adults. Thulir is one of the first educational initiatives that Runner's High started working with. Thulir believes that children from disadvantaged sections in rural areas need an education that would help them to gain self-respect and live with dignity. For this, they need to acquire skills relevant to the community and the local economy and this is what the initiative works towards. Thulir is located in the Sittilingi valley that nestles between the Kalrayan and the Sitheri hills in the Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu (South India) and is home to around 15,000 Malayalee adivasi (indigenous) people. This area, which is around 75 km each from Dharmapuri, Salem, and Thiruvannamalai, was very poorly connected by road or phone until a decade ago. There are twenty-one Malayalee (Adivasi) hamlets, two Lambadi hamlets, and one Dalit hamlet here. The Hill slopes are Reserved Forest areas and the valley is green. Agriculture is the predominant occupation of the people here. More here: <https://www.thulir.org/wp/>



Day 1

The build-up to the run was exciting and we had lot of fervent discussions in the week leading up to the start. While all three of us were engaged with our respective commitments at work, our minds were already getting ready for a great time together. One thing we were ready for is to accept what is not planned or expected! This mindset is very important for an ultra-runner. This started with the start itself 😊. We changed the start point of the run from Silk Board to Saket, my home at the last minute for logistics reasons. We started the run early morning at 5:30 a.m. Mani made a very nice gesture of getting the four of us a special "Run to Thulir" shirt. We wore it for the first day's run. The first 20kms was through Sarjapur road till Attibele. While the early morning was ok, later the traffic was bad and the road got narrow. We were concerned for Krishan and realized that a slower speed was working better for him in terms of managing his injury. So, though the initial plan was to stick together, after an hour we decided to come back every 25 minutes to do a walk together for 5 minutes. Also, we took the precaution of pacing in a manner that we do not lose sight of each other. Ravi, our one-man crew in a car was a lifesaver, and the first breakfast we had, made us realize his importance. We had sufficiently warned him that when we get hungry, we can be very nasty and apologized in advance 😊. Thankfully though, that never happened. It was a pleasant day and we ran strong. We had to again run through some crazy traffic at Hosur when we had to go through the market. Once we hit the highways, the plan was to stick to the service road on the left side (making it easy for Ravi to reach us). The service roads/shoulder of the highway were usually empty and peaceful to run. The route was undulating as we passed from Hosur through the forest area and came closer to Krishnagiri. Then we got a nice drizzle that cooled us down and brought smiles! We closed the day at about 15 km from Krishnagiri toll gate, where our hotel for the night was located. Krishan too finished strong and we were all happy with the way the day turned out. We had a good heavy dinner and hit the bed as early as we could after preparing for the next day.

Running @ Thulir

Before Thulir began, unlike many other rural regions, almost all children below 14 were enrolled in schools! The parents were quite keen on schooling and so children were religiously sent to schools even when there were no regular teachers in the schools and no teaching or learning was happening. Most children dropped out of formal schooling at class 8 or 10, often after failing exams. The teenagers consequently had very low self-esteem, lacked basic academic skills, were frustrated, and usually migrated to nearby towns to work as menial labour. Schooling had succeeded in convincing them that farming or any kind of work with the hands was inferior and something to be ashamed of. Thulir decided to try to improve the academic skills of school-going children and to provide meaningful and useful learning opportunities for teenagers who had stopped schooling. Thus, Thulir started off as a post-school Resource and Learning Centre. The main programmes of Thulir till 2015 were,

- ✱ An after-school programme for school-going children.
- ✱ A full-time 'hands-on' basic technology course for adolescents who had opted out of school.
- ✱ On-site training of building artisans to specialise in sustainable construction.

During a visit to Thulir, I realised the immense talent and enthusiasm the children had and how physical activity could be a potent way of educating them and improving their self-esteem. Yet, there was hardly any space for physical activity in the Indian formal educational system. With my involvement in various grassroots efforts, especially experiences with training children for running, I saw a confluence of both my passions – running and working for the education of the disadvantaged. We started training the children there for running and in fact, this was the origin of Runner's High (<http://www.runnershigh.in>), a wonderful community of runners who change lives through running.



Day 2

On a multi-day run, good sleep and enough time for the morning ablutions matter a lot! It is the small things that set the tone for the entire day. We woke up as early as 3:30 a.m as we had to also drive out 15kms to the point we stopped at on Day 1. We had by now come down in altitude from the cool weather of Bangalore and were expecting a change in weather. We crossed Krishnagiri and took the turn at Krishnagiri to join the Bangalore-Chennai Highway towards Bargur. We would meet Ravi every hour or so and for 3 big meals a day. Our typical meal would be Idlis and Pongal the first two times and curd rice (and some leftover Pongal) the third time. Of course, coffee had to be there to keep our eyes wide open! Ravi would constantly drive ahead, get these for us, and made sure our nutrition and hydration were never delayed. He also would surprise us with some tender coconut or juice occasionally! He had to wake up with us and many times slept later than us as he had to prepare water cans for the next day etc. He helped us check out of the hotel, load the bags, etc. to move to the next stop. He was a gem and it is simply amazing that he handled all of this on his own. It got warmer as we neared Bargur and we started feeling the heat and humidity of the region. Our hydration increased and the pace slowed down as well. Occasionally, someone would stop by asking us what we were doing and why. We took it as an opportunity to talk about Thulir and Sittlingi, stopping and explaining our cause. There was even a veterinary doctor who was intrigued and wanted to look at the website and visit. It was wonderful to see the youth and old ask us if we want water or anything. From Mani:

Many people standing on road side, in bikes, lorries were cheering for us. Most of them were curious and some interesting conversations:

- most of them start the conversation in English or Hindi with lot of struggle. When I answer in Tamil they give the usual surprise “meesai illanona North Indian nu ninaichen (since you don't have mush thought you are a North Indian) 😊.
- one old villager with smile asked “yen odureenga? (why are you running?) Walking ah ?”. 😊
- one guy in bike repeatedly asked how he can support our run with water or anything else we need.
- one lady standing in front of her house “vendudhalaya? (Pilgrimage on foot?)

After 1 pm, we left the highways and turned to beautiful village roads towards Thirupathur! It was a relief to leave behind the noise, direct sun, and dust. The village roads and lush green fields were very inviting. The three of us finished exactly at the hotel where we were staying as it was on our route! We celebrated with a hearty dinner and ice cream as well!

Runner's High and Thulir – Growing together

As the years went by, both Runner's High and Thulir grew from strength to strength. Our relationship grew stronger. Every year youth and teenagers in the village were trained by us and would participate in major running events like Auroville Marathon, Bengaluru Marathon, Hyderabad Marathon etc. These running trips exposed them to new learning, relationships, and opportunities as well. We started seeing a marked increase in the confidence of the youth. When we started, girls seldom were allowed by families to come to these running events. But, after much effort and convincing we managed to get two girls to train and run at the Auroville Marathon and it was a big step forward! Many wonderful individuals also played a role in nurturing this relationship. Balaji, an Asha volunteer also initiated cycling and encouraged the youth to take part in endurance events. We also took our runners from Bangalore to run in Thulir as part of training. It was again a great way to learn more and open possibilities of support of various kinds.



Day 3

After two days of running, we realized that the average pace we were following as a team would mean that we would not reach Thulir at the end of Day 4 as originally planned. So, we decided to change the route and instead of going through Thiruvannamalai town, we decided to turn right earlier towards Sathanur to make it shorter for Day 4. Since we ended Day 2 at the Hotel itself, it meant there was no drive to the start point on Day 3, enabling us to get a few winks more sleep 😊. The cumulative fatigue from two days of almost 150kms started showing. Start of Day 3 was slow and the muscles were sore. We joined the Krishnagiri-Thiruvannamalai road soon and thankfully it was wider and better than we had expected. The weather though got quickly hot as the sun came out. Ravi had a bit of a challenge as unlike highways there were no hotels from where he could get decent food for us. The first food break got delayed and with the rising temperature, tempers also raised. Thankfully, we handled it well and no one was burnt 😊. The timing of nutrition/food breaks become critical in such runs as you need a humongous number of calories to sustain an activity of this duration. So, it becomes important that we do not bonk (low blood sugar/hypoglycemia) as it can derail the runner. Day 3 turned out to be tougher than the first two days and all of us struggled with our pace dropping in the mid-afternoon. In the last few hours, I started feeling a sharp pain in the ankle/shin area. Krishan was meanwhile still handling his pain with grace and calm. I took inspiration from him to keep moving. We ended the day in front of a government school near Sathanur and that was a befitting end. We had interesting conversations with the kids and they had a lot of questions about what we were doing and why. When we explained how we are raising funds for the cause, they were supportive and we hope it inspired them to make a change as well! After the run, we reached Ram's beautiful home. After two days of a hotel stay, it felt like home finally! We were pampered with healthy home-cooked meals and a good night's sleep. Ram, Mani's friend has an inspiring story that brought him closer to Thiruvannamalai. We also could meet Krishna and Ravi from Thulir at his place and we made our plans for the final day to Thulir!



New beginnings and initiatives

Project-based learning gave the students so much confidence that many went back and wrote the public-school examinations as private candidates. Many students completed school and went on to college to pursue further studies. Some have returned to Sittilingi after gaining college degrees and work as teachers, electricians, masons, accountants, and small entrepreneurs here. From the very beginning, the village community kept requesting Thulir to start a school. After a decade of its functioning and a good track record, the requests became more persistent. Finally, in 2014, the decision was taken to start a school. Prospective parents, teachers, and other members of the village community discussed and debated the culture and values of this new school. The school was envisaged to be

**A space where importance would be given to tribal culture & values, agriculture, and the environment.
*A place where education would not be abstract, but one that integrates our head, heart, and hands.
A sanctuary, where children and adults could learn and explore in an atmosphere of freedom, equality, inclusion, cooperation, dignity, and joy.

The Runner's High community with its various fund-raising runs and initiatives continued support for Thulir and played an integral role in funding the construction and running of the school. We also continued training and running too became an important aspect of the curriculum. We also had many initiatives like summer camps, exchange trips, etc. where the children from Thulir interacted and lived with children from other NGOs that Runner's High worked with. There was a lot of learning and growth for all the children, adults, and organizations thanks to these initiatives.



Day 4

At end of the third day, we were in pain and there was clearly swelling in the shin area for Krishan and me. Thanks to Ram's friends we found ice and did our best to get ourselves ready to head out for the fourth day. Just when we felt it was going to be a tough day, our saviors and knights arrived! Krishna and Vinod (another teacher from Marudham school in Thiruvannamalai) joined us in their cycles just when we turned into the road leading to Naripalli and Kotapatti from the Sathanur area. We were prepared for the famous heat and humidity and even smeared ourselves with sunscreen. The morning was good as we slowly warmed up and got into a rhythm. While Krishan and I were in "manage and salvage" mode 😊, Mani was keeping us together. Over the years through running, we have come to understand each other so well that words need not be exchanged and we would know what is going on. When we know one of us is in trouble, we rally as a team. Our running is NOT about winning over someone else or showing who is the best. We run to make meaning and memories together. Soon at around 11 a.m we had wonderful energy and support from the team from Chennai – Dr. Bala, Charles, Stephen, and his brother. They appeared just when we needed the support. Charles is an experienced physio and he really helped Krishan to relieve pain and keep moving. With Dr. Bala for company, we fell into a rhythm and started chugging along as a team. As we entered Naripalli, it started raining heavily, and somehow, we resisted the temptation of stopping for lunch in the warm confines of a bakery. The pouring rain did not stop all day. The excitement of reaching Sittlingi and meeting the children and the Thulir team kept us going. As the challenges mounted every day, our spirit never dipped. Over the years we have learned to laugh at ourselves, how we can still make mistakes, and the fallacies of our expectations. This ability makes us stronger and humbler at the same time. The finish was simply out of the world. Seeing the kids, hospital staff, and many people from the village waiting for us patiently really warmed our hearts. It was a beautiful moment forever etched in our lives. As Ravi, rightly put it, we had run 300kms over 4 days to reach Sittlingi and that moment made all the effort worth it. As we hugged everyone and each other, we were ushered into the panchayat office, and it was an honour to meet and be felicitated by Madheshwari, the first tribal woman president of the Sittlingi panchayat. Later we had tea in the THI hospital and were interviewed by all the staff who were intrigued and amazed by what we had done. It was fun banter and of course, we just could not stop talking!



Mighty Mighty Sittlingi

Even before Thulir started in Sittlingi, the foundation for empowering the village and the tribals were laid by Tribal Health Initiative, founded by Dr. Regi and Dr. Lalitha - <https://tribalhealth.org/>. THI did extensive work in the field of health and Thulir was the right partner in terms of helping bring education to the valley and the marginalized. THI and Thulir did not stop there. Sittlingi has grown to be a model village of sorts as true empowerment comes with ownership and strength in those who are discriminated against. Thanks to their efforts, the farmers got together and formed the SOFA – a collective of organic farmers who now are a cooperative that has grown admirably and has a huge reach. They also empowered the Lambadi tribals to create PORGAI, a collective of artisans from the tribal communities. The self-help groups for women and the various initiatives soon saw a woman candidate stand for election and become the head of the panchayat.

I thought to myself as I saw these changes take place – The child who was once ridiculed for being a tribal in the government school now walks with her head held high saying "I am from mighty mighty sittlingi!"

Runner's High played a small role in this journey as we brought running and fitness to the village. The village which was hesitant to send their girls out of the confines of their homes, now saw girls running regularly early morning and even going to different cities to participate in marathons. The kids of Sittlingi were running their hearts out and even standing at the podiums of events with thousands of participants from across the country. The village came together and even organized "The Sittlingi Run" with all the young and the old coming together. We now proclaim to the world "We are the Mighty Mighty Sittlingi!"



Day 5 – The beginning and not the end!

It was a memorable and beautiful finale on the last day of our run. We woke up to a drizzle and this time we had a big tribe with Suresh, Ravi, and Senthil joining us along with Ram Subbu and Vinod. Suresh, Ravi, and Senthil are all adults now and started running with us when they were teenagers. Ram Subbu, our friend from the Kalrayan hills is an inspiration and has trained the youth of Sittilingi on solar electrification and helped create careers for many. Vinod, a young teacher from Marudham is an inspiration for choosing an offbeat career and dedicating his time to the disadvantaged. We ran in and around Thulir and the various villages. Suresh, who is also the coach for all the children and youth in the village had organized the runners so that they meet with us at different points. We met the kids who joined us early morning and then planned to go to school after their runs. Later, we spent time in a few government schools that would be helped with the funds we raise. We also clicked a few photos with the children. Many of the teachers also joined us on the run. Krishna and Chutti (Anu and Krishna's son) also gave us company on their cycles. Dr. Ravi joined us for a long stretch as well. Thanks to Senthil, Ravi, and Suresh, we had support throughout. We planned to finish the run at Thulir itself this time. Just as we entered the last stretch and neared the turning to the school, we saw the entire school waiting for us – every child and teacher all ready to run! As soon as we met them and exchanged high-fives, the kids crowded around us and gave us handmade cards and beautiful gifts with their artwork. It was very touching! The kids were full of energy and apparently, they had been waiting to run with us all day! We ran the last 2kms with them and it was the best part of the entire journey! A fitting finale to one of the most memorable runs we all have done!

The spirit was high after the run! After many photos with the kids, the team, and each other later, we decided to for a quick shower and return for Lunch at Thulir. We had a sumptuous millet-based lunch and sweets. Then we all got together in the central hall sitting in a circle. The children had a lot of questions for us. Here are some:

What makes you or inspires you to run? (Each one of us shared our inspiration and reasons)

If I want to run like you all, what should I do?

What is challenging for you when you run?

We also spent a lot of time later discussing the library, and books the kids like and want. The kids were eager to learn about a lot of things in the world – seas, oceans, mysteries, running, the body, stories from across the world, inspiring women, and the list went on! It filled our hearts with joy to see the insatiable hunger for knowledge and learning. The happiness and enthusiasm for learning were evident in the interactions. We are sure that the library will create wonders for the children and make a lasting change in their lives. As we wrapped up, the children gifted us with more artwork and cards that were our true medals and prizes for the run. The children pleaded that we stay for longer and be with them for a few days more! We promised them that this was not the end, but the beginning! The fundraising for the library initiative continues and if you would like to contribute, please do so - <https://www.eventurbo.com/org/RHSVMT/public/15448>

Both Thulir and Runner's High had gone through immense challenges through COVID and the last few years had been difficult. At Runner's High getting the community back and reinstating the belief in what we do and who we are was of utmost need and at Thulir, helping the children come back to school for the joy of learning was the prime need of the hour. In both instances, the resilience of the community and the value system created as the foundation ensured we came out of the crisis STRONGER TOGETHER! For us at Runner's High, this run was truly a journey to the heart – showing who we are and what we are about!

We hope to do the Sittilingi Run soon as well. The discussions have already started and we only will get mightier from here! Our journey does not come to an end. This is the start of many more wonderful initiatives that will bring lasting change in the lives of everyone.













