

THULIR TRIP TO GUDALUR

How We Got To Thorapally

A mini bus was organised to take all the Thulir teachers plus two Thulir babies from Sitlingi to Thorapally –our first stop delayed by several hours by the enthusiastic tourists flocking to Ooty. We reached thorapally at 9 pm just in time for dinner. We stayed at the One-All guest house where we were welcomed by Prabha,Badichi and Kannan of One-All team. One-All is a unique programme aimed at community building through ultimate frisbee. After some informal introductions between the two groups and when the snores started drowning the conversations, everyone snuggled into a warm night's sleep.

Day 1

Right next to where we lived was the workshop of “The Real Elephant Collective” that makes life-sized elephants with Lantana- a weed that is taking over the landscape at an alarming rate. The elephants crafted to perfection based on the measurements of real ones roaming not very far from the site are a sight to behold! It is no wonder that the two babies with their eyes wide open refused to go near one for a very long time, but mesmerized at those grand creatures.

We split into two groups and, joined by more youth from the One-All programme, visited two villages – Kummamoola and Erumadu.

Krishnan took charge of the Erumadu group. They met the youth of the village – some of the first to sign up for the One-All Frisbee programme. He briefed about the village and the work of Adivasi Munnetra Sangam. The organisation meets at different levels to discuss and fulfill the needs of every village be it education, health, human rights etc.

There was also sharing about hunting which was predominant among mullukurumbas; the rituals and celebrations around it and how celebrations of any kind involve the entire village. Taking young boys on their first hunt was considered very special and celebrated.

The discrimination against Paniyas also came up during the discussion. Although things are changing for the better, intercaste marriages are still discouraged.

With its uninhibited offering of the skies and the greenery, Kummamoola is a place one would easily fall in love with. It was a Betta Kurumbu village. The houses were all clustered together around the elderly who were chewing vettila and looking at us with amusement as we walked past into a community meeting hall which serves as an education centre. We had a round-table (minus the table) on values around life, work, marriage(dowry specifically), land rights (or the lack of it) and ofcourse elephants and other wild-life which play an important part in their daily life.

The discussions sometimes led to a juncture where the new ideas and practices came in conflict with the old soon to be taken over by a contemplative silence.

Day 2

The next morning, everyone was very excited to cross the border at Mudumalai to spot some elephants. Equipped with sweaters and scarves and filled with very humble expectations that the animals will queue up in a row and present themselves in no time, the passengers jeered on. Eyes glued to the forests, phantom creatures were spotted in plenty along with spotted deer, one wild boar and an elephant family that was busy feeding just by the side of the road. We had a good look at the giants to our heart's content until our bus driver, Mani, started honking to get its attention – Please do not be like Mani – and all of us decided that it was not a good idea to stay on.

Some lucky teachers also spotted what could have been Dholes / Wild dogs or foxes.

We passed the Theppakaud Elephant Rehabilitation Centre where elephants were bathed, fed and taken on walks too. Mani felt that the trip would be complete only if we spotted a big cat ! One can be certain that although we did not spot it, it must've definitely spotted us.

After breakfast we all got into a circle and danced to the resounding tribal music. One-All friends were kind enough to excuse our missteps and patient till all of us managed to sync our steps. Once we got dancing we did not want to stop, but we had to because such is life.

We had a brief visit to the ACCORD hospital where Ambika Chechi showed us around and explained to us the various health facilities that the tribals can avail as well as the challenges that the tribal community faces even today to get basic treatment.

Visiting Vidyodaya was very special because Anu and Krishna worked with this organisation before heading to Sittilingi. They had built parts of the building and had also been educators here. It was a joy to see Anu nostalgically reminiscing her yester years and entertaining all the teachers with anecdotes.

To not cause any disturbance in the functioning of the school, we split up and each one went to observe a different class. Each class was alive and buzzing with exchanges and activities.

They had come prepared to ask the Thulir team questions based on what they had read about the school in Salai's Selvam book which covers various alternative schools across Tamilnadu.

Some of the questions that both set of participants spent a nearly two hours talking about :

- What is the socio-political context in which the school is situated ?
- Why do students drop-out of school ?
- How is schooling different from what it was ?
- What about education of girls ?
- What does munnnetram (development ?) mean for people of Sittilingi ?

Although there were opinions exchanged these questions are worth revisiting.

We headed to Ooty soon after and frolicked on the expansive meadows wishing that the day wouldn't end. The teachers rolled and ran and played like little children. When the sun announced its departure, we too left with our hearts and phones full of picturesque images.

We camped at Anu's childhood home for the night; braving the cold after a warm meal and lots of hot tea.

Day 3

After a brief visit to the Botanical Garden where we lost all our phone's storage to the most beautiful flowers, with a little grumbling about not having enough time for shopping, we headed to Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri.

The fascinating journey of 25 years of the organisation was presented to us by Anita. It is simply impossible to even summarise the range of work which started with research in Bee collection and has now expanded to seed saving, community radio, student exchange and manufacturing health products, all routes to protecting whatever little is left of the nature around us.

The trip officially culminated at Keystone and the bus was off to Sittilingi carrying inside it not just people but happiness of having learnt so many things, the after-taste of new friendships, new knowledge, new perspectives and a renewed feeling of knowing this world a little better.
