



Coming from a land that silently corrupts your internal, I think it is difficult to restrain yourself from romanticising the daily life you see outside of yours. Although that might be the fundamental human quality, it is only the behaviour of a contaminated soul to not just romanticise your sight but also the feeling. In saying so, the words below are a romanticised experience of mine on a trip to Sittiling Valley as I am plainly one of Those Souls (but I will try hard to project the reality)

There were boxed bus stops on either side of the roads in frequent distances, some had people resting in them, some were openly empty. We crossed villages named Naripalli and Thanipadi, names that would go through a smile and a subdued frown back home. We stopped before the bamboo gate at Thulir, the school was empty - we were late. Air went through my nostrils, for the first time in a while. A funny thing about travelling, you can tell the place by the air in your first breath - some heavy, some distressed, some relieved. We took our bags for the next three nights and followed Kavya akka, who was so willingly kind to us just like the many other people we met henceforth. Kavya and her husband, Mallesh, are a young couple who estranged themselves from the blatant intoxication of cities and moved to this village 7 months back with their 5 year old son, Abhimanyu. They invited us for lemon juice and a brief overview of Sittling, Amma and I listened happily. They handed us our dinner which was made by Jothi akka and Kavitha akka, who also make the food in the school. The evening was quiet, there was nothing to do there after 4, which I found uncomfortable, irritating even. That night I couldn't help but wonder what sets a city apart from a village, and what in the world sets a village inferior to a city.

I rose awake, nervous to meet the day. We then walked to the assembly in the school. The children were in a circle, reciting songs and Thirukurals. It was nice to see that each and every one of them had a twig or a leaf or a rock in their hand to fiddle with while singing. Once that was over, they got up to sweep their classrooms and Ram anna sat with amma and I to take us through the blossoming of Sittling Valley. Thulir was the latest floret that bloomed. Anu and Krishna, architects, heard the locals and their worries and set up Thulir as an after school learning centre for kids who went to the local government schools. What is now a popular school for younger kids in the village, Thulir is also a sustainable space in an

ultimatum that attests to the definition of growth.

We left for Porgai after. Porgai is a revival project of a dying craft of the Lambadi community. The two surviving women who knew the embroidery were noticed by Lalitha and they taught 60 other women who are now part of the business. The embroidery was intense, intricate. The designs were inspired from the local nature: millets and turmeric. I was astonished at the sheer creativity. Clothes become a medium of knowledge, heritage and art and the mass public is gravitated to just western topics and trends.



We went back to the school for lunch. The school fed the kids millets and legumes that grew in their village, to ensure at least one meal of the day is monitored healthy. I grabbed a plate and found a spot under the tree. Before I could look back up from my plate, I was surrounded by little kids that crouched around me, asking me to say something in english. After lunch, they proceeded back to their classes, which is just storytime or drama class post lunch everyday.

Time passed. Soon, I was asked to teach songs, which is a tradition for the arrival of any new volunteer. Before getting into the song, I gave them the meaning of the same. While speaking in Tamil, which was suddenly difficult as I was consciously eliminating English words, I found myself translating English to Tamil in my mind before speaking it. What I was saying sounded wrong, sounded like I was a foreigner using Google translate, it sounded as though I didn't belong here. I heard voices of little boys repeating my anglicised tamil in the back. The kids ran to the ground after and I walked behind, questioning my purpose of being "sensitive" when I could not speak my mother tongue confidently. I sat under a tree with a few older girls and I watched them as they laughed at stories they shared from their villages and neighbourhoods. The sun fell to 4 pm and the vans picked the children from school.

I was left feeling heavy with awe of the inclusivity these kids pose to me and their peers. The absolute familiarity in the way they speak. They were in a state of 'viduthalai' to express their complete childness in their strides, something that faded from me very quickly. I was pondering the extent of humanity that afternoon, staring at the paddy fields pressed down below the Kalrayan hills.



The next day, we headed out to SOFA (Sittiling Organic Farmers Association). The four of them, Lalitha, Reggi, Anu and Krishna, learnt earlier in their project that the Village of Sittiling was united with 3 communities: The Dalit community, The Tribal community and the Lambadi community. Most of the land was owned by the tribes and the villagers were all majorly farmers that did not see profit in a while. The collective was set up to help the farmers and the locals to continue their livelihoods. SOFA focuses on organic farming, but what really puts them under the limelight they deserve is the number of lives they are able to touch. SOFA embodies a soap unit, a biscuit and pappad unit, a protein mix and oil unit, organic fertiliser and pesticide unit and even makes natural honey. They help women farmers with a dedicated wing for them. The akka who showed us around was so proud to do so. At the end of the tour, she told us how happy she is to be able to make money back home with family around and that she doesn't have to travel to a city faraway.

We were then sitting under a tree drinking tea, and met two women who were speaking in Hindi to themselves and in Tamil to us. She told us their language has no script, but they have migrated from Rajasthan generations back. I placed them to be from the Lambadi community. They asked amma for her husband's name, her sisters' names, where they live, what they do. And that is when I realised that everyone who spoke to me in the school and outside had asked the same questions at first.





We returned to the school for lunch, again. Looking at the kids again, I was happy now. I felt like I had known them for years, like I knew what made them happy and not. I loved being around their buzz. I loved that they held my hands while walking. It had never been this easy before. The air had an ease. A girl, Veena, made me a bracelet out of thread which was incredibly thoughtful of her. It began raining. The smell of mud wafted aggressively through our noses. I don't smell that in Chennai anymore. We played chess and we splashed water on each other. I did not want them to go back home, but they did. After the rain stopped, I saw Veena next to the tea shop, she waved and didn't stop waving. She didn't wave for me to wave back, she smiled wide and waved until I smiled that wide too. And I noticed that among all the kids.

The next day, we were to leave after the forest walk. All of us took a partner each and walked to the 'kottam'. All of them built houses out of leaves and branches and set up shops as games. It was so interesting to watch what they did inside the 'house'. They did not watch TV or sell carrots and capsicums. They swept, they grounded turmeric, and they made food for guests. The games they played were adapted from their own households, even though it is quite obvious as information, it was nice to look from the outside. Sometime after, a little girl sat next me and began talking about her uncle and her grandmother and her sister who has chicken pox and how her parents are separated and how she really wants to try strawberries. I couldn't believe the wishes and worries in this girl of age 7.

We went back to have our last lunch there, and headed out in our black car that was dusted clean. I wished we had taken a bus. We stopped at the tribal hospital to place a visual in our minds for all that we had heard about since the outset of our journey. The hospital is the first floret that Lalitha and Reggi grew in this space. While walking back to the car, I saw two men holding hands. I shut the door with a feeling I have never felt visiting a place. You can't express this sort of love through words like heart-warming and wholesome. It sure was lovely, but something in me grew. Was it a dormant concern? Was it hope to decontaminate my soul? Or was it just the addition of a perspective? Anger maybe?

All that was on my mind after was the song the kids sang one day in the assembly:

"Everywhere we go, people ask us who we are  
and where we are from  
we are from sittiling, mighty mighty sittiling  
if you can't hear us, we will say it louder"

