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Pathashaala - Vallipuram, Tamil Nadu - Shifting Some Pieces For The New Century



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About The Author

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G.Gautama is the director - Secretary of the Chennai Education Centre (Paathshaala and Outreach) of the Krishnamurthi Foundation of India (KFI). He was Principal of The School, KFI from 1991 to 2009, where he guided several initiatives such as Active Learning, Mixed Age Group Learning in Junior and Middle school and a dynamic and wide learning programme for High School students.

A new Krishnamurti school quietly came into being when Pathashaala started on 19 August 2010 in a mixed age classroom with 14 students and 3 teachers. As one of the many projects of The School, Pathashaala began when KFI could complete the purchase of land at Vallipuram, 90 km south of Chennai in 2006, at an affordable price. The idea of a small residential school for 120 students emerged – we decided to start with class 5 and grow slowly. A committee of teachers steered the project and a lot of effort went into planning, discussion and conceptualization among staff, at Executive committee and KFI levels. Pathashaala owes its existence to the teachers of The School and the extraordinary spirit that flowered there. It is a tribute to what teachers can accomplish when they work together.

The Pathashaala campus is situated on the flood plain of Palar, a river that starts in Karnataka, runs through Tamilnadu, ending at the Bay of Bengal near Mahabalipuram. The elements, Sun, Water, Wind and Earth, play together here, interestingly, challengingly. The horizon, visible on all sides, adds the fifth dimension.

This campus is built on the degraded zone located between 5 villages, a space that was almost impossible to inhabit. During the rains the land surface holds water and an abundance of grass grows, 32 varieties. In summer the land is cracked as the clayey soil yields its water to the sun's warmth. The clayey soil is slippery in the rains and uneven and treacherous to walk in the summer. This was not land that could just be shaped according to human desire. It had to be understood and listened to, and then it would permit some movement.

Kancheepuram district was well known for its 'eris', the interconnected water storage irrigation tanks from very ancient times. As one travels to Pathashaala today along Vallipuram eri one sees distant hills. History and Geography appear to have a role in the development of this little campus. Sadly, there is no flowing river in the Palar today; sand mining has ensured no flooding and low flow. The intractable problem of excessive water converted to a boon. Pathashaala is blessed with underground water at a short depth.

Pathashaala is an attempt to tap the potential of the elements in non - contradictory, harmonious ways. With plenty of sun, this was an opportunity to bank on Solar energy and LED bulbs for lighting. There is no power for 12 to 16 hours often but thanks to this choice, Pathashaala has not seen a night without light, a very important matter considering that small children reside here.

The buildings were designed to be cool on hot days with large windows and passive solar cooling through roofs that have brick domes and vaults made of Wardha tumblers. The buildings are all single storied, with visual signatures to indicate their presence with colourful domes and vaults covered with broken tiles, unlike the commonly seen flat concrete or tiled gable roofs.

Free movement of air is vital for a sense of well being. The large windows of Pathashaala with stainless steel mesh not only allow free flow of air but also permit a far gaze from literally any location in any building. The classrooms are L shaped to enable alternate interactive forms to reveal themselves, moving away from the 'standard' format of teacher in front at the blackboard. All classes have movable blackboards, permitting rearrangements.

During the monsoon months the heavy rains used to make the land soggy from November to late February. Pathashaala campus, slopes from West to East - so we built water channels that allowed the passage of water to the east, which drains the campus quickly. Very simple actions have far reaching consequences.

Initially there were hardly any trees in the campus. Now with the drainage of water and curtailment of grazing, native trees such as Poongai, Nona, Ilippai, Neem, Naval have sprouted, and many have been planted. One of our resident students has documented 77 varieties of butterflies, over 140 varieties of birds and many varieties of insects. With this profusion of life, students observe the daily flight of birds, butterflies and the cycle of life at close quarters.

With common elements - blue sky, white clouds, dark clouds, sunset and sunrise colours, moon, stars, planets and the milky way, rain, lightning - the skies of Pathashaala offer beauty on a daily basis and literally

in every direction that one turns. The impact of seeing an unobstructed view of the horizon on the mind is one of great release and a quietening. The sky, the big educator, places all human activity in perspective. Pathashaala has taken to heart the 'horizontal' and the 'flat' in its design. The classrooms and dining hall are floor seating. Round tables which seat 5 to 6 people each dot the classrooms and the dormitories and also the dining hall where the staff, students and visitors eat. Such consistency one hopes permits an instant orientation to how things are done at Pathashaala. Round tables with no head, set the tone for 'equal conversations'. This is an important dimension and has far reaching implications.

Pathashaala has focussed on the active learning and constructivist approaches as significant pedagogical elements. Individuals construct meaning out of their experiences and understanding, whatever the inputs. This act of constructing meaning, when supported by reflective processes, becomes an important educational approach as one learns not only about the world and disciplines but also about oneself.

Acceptance of the fact that we all construct meaning, is a significant doorway to meaningful functioning in a community of students and teachers. It is not necessary to search for the perfect construction. Individuals need to appreciate and value multiple perspectives and develop an inclusive sensibility. Peer respect is a significant corollary of the constructivist collaborative approach. Pathashaala choicelessly brings the diversity of perspectives into all spaces of philosophical and functional discussion, academic learning and around the meal tables. The round tables in the classroom bring discussion and expression to the fore.

Staff and students participate in cooking, cleaning and field work breaking the barrier between learning and living. In a significant move Pathashaala has chosen to shift the nomenclature of members - Educator-learner and Learner-educator are the terms used for the adults and the young respectively, underscoring the fact all are learners and also that all are concerned with the learning of others.

One of the major design choices at Pathashaala has to do with sanitation. The flat land, the clayey soil and water close to the surface made us rethink sanitation. Thanks to the research of a colleague who spent 2006-07 with us, Pathashaala chose the dry composting toilet, using the Western toilet configuration, as the mainstay. This approach, used consistently by all students and staff, has enabled Pathashaala to be a zero blackwater campus.

The best way of not polluting water is to not create dirty water. Apart from maintaining a clean water footprint, this approach has opened unimaginable educational opportunities. Lifestyle change is possibly the acid test of learning. Pathashaala demonstrates that it is possible to make significant lifestyle shifts that are environmentally sound. On Gandhi Jayanti, 2nd Oct and 2nd April Pathashaala harvests compost. With many oriented individuals, a compost harvesting festival has been proposed for 2015. Pathashaala designed stainless dry toilets when the ceramic bowls were no longer manufactured.

The educational rhythm includes the cycles of agriculture, the storks, pond herons and the large number of birds, reptiles and butterflies that visit or reside on the campus. It is a wild place that holds a strange serenity.

Pathashaala could only be conceived of as a small school, even smaller than other KFI schools. 'Economy of scale' is an oft used phrase. A lesser heard phrase is 'Small is Beautiful'. The latter by E.F. Schumacher challenges the developmental paradigm of large enterprises and intones an 'economics as if people matter'. Dunbar's number 150 is about relationship and ordering principle. External regulation and control increases with size and scale. Pathashaala aims to move in the direction of self regulation and convivial community, where the 'awakening of intelligence' is in the foreground and not authoritarian control. To our collective amazement, Pathashaala is an economically viable school. This possibly should not come as a surprise when we understand that India was dotted with small schools, lakhs of them, that provided education to everyone.

Pathashaala was conceived from the very start to make sense to the neighbourhood. An outreach program touches the lives of children and teachers in nearby schools and we hope would bring some changes into classroom pedagogy there. The Outreach area has opened connections with local organic farmers. Today at Pathashaala a seed bank of 18 varieties of rice is being created and organic rice and vegetables are grown. Women from the village who work at Pathashaala are being supported to have a kitchen garden, so their family's nutritional intake improves. They also use solar lights, the same lamps being used in Pathashaala for student prep in the evenings.

Krishnamurti's words "Don't be corrupt." are beacons. 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? Would it be possible to build this place without corrupt foundations?

Pathashaala is a social exploration, much as it is educational and environmental.