

Vanakkam Aikiyam Friends

The beginning of 2021 started with a wonderful long monsoon. With the Kuilapalayam kolam (village pond) full, and the greenery in full bloom, we are starting afresh and looking forward to the new year.

Although corona virus pandemic slowed everything down, our staff did their best to keep up a positive attitude by getting busy improving the school. We kept up to date with the changing precautions, and are still following the latest news to find out when we can reopen the school to our students again. While high schools and colleges are finally open in Tamil Nadu, we are still waiting for kindergartens and primary schools to be allowed to operate at full capacity.

News from the Kindergarten

Over the break, the Kindergarten teachers, newly trained in Montessori methods, created beautiful new toys for the young children. The new play kitchen is full of amazing fruits and vegetables hand sewn by our dedicated staff.



Ana, one of the Kindergarten teachers, has been instrumental in the shift to this alternative pedagogy. Since she has arrived 3 years ago, many new games, toys, and methods to teaching and learning have been adopted. The Montessori pedagogy is a child-centred approach to teaching where children are given freedom to choose activities, and a thoughtfully prepared learning environment to explore. With this method, children choose a

For many months, our teachers have followed social distancing protocol through online learning. Even though this was a challenge for many of our students, as cell phones with internet were not always easy to access, we made sure to find cell phones to donate to any students that were lacking.

Aum - Shankar



learning pathway and the teachers are there to guide and facilitate their individual process, rather than providing direct instruction.



At the start of this year, Ana organized a workshop open to all Auroville and Outreach school teachers around the topic of Sensorial Maths and Geometry. In this workshop, participants learned over Zoom from a trained Montessori teacher in Mexico about how to introduce geometry to children. The teachers who participated reported that they have been learning so much

about maths and geometry and that it has been great fun to work together with all the different grade teachers. They said that this method is so special because you aren't simply learning formulas to repeat to the children, but learning through exploration. Through the materials and cut outs, they learn by feeling – facilitating the children to investigate the shapes, deciding on their own the depth and intensity of their learning. In this way, the children connect personally to the lessons and will remember them for much longer.

In time, we hope to expand the Montessori teaching style to more grades in the school, and to be an example for other schools around Auroville, in the bioregion and all over India.



Cycle Trip

In January, our eighth standard students participated in a two-day cycle trip to Perumukkal organized by

Payanam Cycling. Payanam Cycling (Payanam means *journey* in Tamil) is a service-oriented program run by the youth of Auroville in coordination with youth from the bioregion. The main objective of this program is to give children a more conscious education of the environment through cycling.

21 Aikiyam students started out at 5 am on Saturday morning. They cycled for over 30 km to the mountain, and then climbed up to visit the Shiva temple at the top. They swam in the ponds and explored their natural surroundings, and slept the night on the mountain. On the way back, they stopped at a village to make food together. They returned back to Auroville at 4 pm the following day.

While on the road, the students stopped at small shops to eat and rest, after eating chicken biriyani for lunch and dinner, one student said with a smile "I won't eat chicken for a whole week!"



Origami Classes

In February, Sampada, a teacher from Pune, and her niece Janhavee, gave classes to our students and teachers about the art of origami. Origami, the Japanese art of paper folding, is about transforming a flat two-dimensional piece of paper into a three-dimensional sculpture through creasing and folding. Sampada became interested in origami when home-schooling her own children 20 years earlier, Janhavee has been



folding with her aunt since she was a kid and loves to share the joy of origami with children. Sampada found that it was a very useful medium for learning as it didn't require a teacher present at all times (students only need to follow diagrams), and there was no language barrier since diagrams can be read by anyone!



Recently, origami has been incorporated into school curriculums all over the world, as it can be used as a method to teach geometry and maths, for example, folding a square into a triangle can teach us about right angles and how to calculate area. Many of these concepts remain abstract to young students, but by seeing shapes of paper physically transform before their eyes can take these ideas out of the books and into reality. Sampada has taught origami in many Auroville schools, all over India, and now because of online schooling she has expanded her teaching to an international audience. She has found that origami has helped students with dexterity and handwriting, with concentration and precision, and with visualization of three-dimensional

spaces. It is also an opportunity to teach language skills. For example, one can fold, bend, pleat, and crease the paper, but most importantly, she believes that origami should be done for the sheer joy of it! Our students rushed to her classes excited to learn new figures, and they eagerly completed their homework, which was to teach another person, a parent or sibling, the same technique. Our teachers were also taught how to incorporate origami in their classrooms, where they learned that origami is unique in its ability to teach students about perspective and transformation. We are grateful to Sampada and Janhatee for teaching us about origami, a perfect intersection between art and science.



Singing Classes

Sampada's nephew, Reeshabh, gave singing classes to our students (for safety, done in the open air). He has a classical Indian music training and sat with a group of students to teach them the Saptak, the foundational scale in classical Indian music.



Pongal Celebration

Our Pongal celebration this year was smaller than usual. There were only a few children on campus picking up homework and getting one-on-one help from teachers. Those few children sang a beautiful song to the staff who were present while we watched the tasty pot of Pongal rice bubble away. At the end of the pooja, tea and Pongal rice were served.

Challenges

This school year has been so different to the norm and it has presented the staff and students with many challenges we had to overcome together. We all learned new skills to cope with the changing situation and we had to be adaptable and positive in our mindset to provide a meaningful educational experience while following social distancing protocols. We are looking forward to having our school operate at full capacity again, and have the life that the children bring back on campus. However, we also are excited to bring with us all the lessons in creativity and flexibility we have learned from this experience into our new school year.

Appeal

The aim of Aikiyam School is to provide a high quality education to children who come from largely disadvantaged backgrounds. Such families cannot afford to pay expensive fees for their children's education, so our fees are kept as low as possible. The school depends on donations for a large part of its income, only a small percentage coming from the Auroville budget.

During the Covid pandemic, the school's income from fees has been considerably reduced. With mostly online tuition available for the children, and limited contact with teachers, it has not been possible to insist on the full school fees to be paid. During the pandemic, the teachers have all accepted a cut in their salaries, and other members of their families are also suffering from the financial impact of the pandemic.

70% of the cost of running the school is for salaries, bonuses, and staff benefits. We have a staff of around thirty teachers, including the school principal, librarian and resource manager. Additionally we have seven cleaning and cooking staff, one maintenance man, one gardener, one secretary, and one administrator. Auroville covers the



maintenance of those teachers and staff members, who are members of the Auroville community. The rest, which includes fourteen teachers, and most of our non-teaching staff, are covered by donations, and the fees we get from students. Teachers' pay is very low in comparison to what they might earn in a government school, although a little more than what they would earn in many privately run schools.

Need and Request

Any help you can give us to help run the school, particularly to pay our teachers, would be deeply appreciated. Either regular or single donations would be very welcome. Methods of donation are given below.

To make a donation, go to www.auroville.org/contents/2835 and choose the way that is most suitable for you. Regardless of your choice, please write to aikiyamschool@auroville.org.in with a copy to unityfund@auroville.org.in explaining that your donation is for Aikivam School

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Our newsletters from 2006 onwards can be read online at: www.aikiyamschool.org