

Shankar

Background

Shankar was born in 1966 in the impoverished village of Kulapalayam, in rural Tamil Nadu, where the only source of livelihood was seasonal agriculture. The houses had, with very few exceptions, floors and walls of baked mud, with roofs of overlapping palmyra leaves. The only mode of transport, besides walking, was by bullock cart, unless you were one of the very few, who could afford a bicycle.

When Shankar was three years old, the Auroville community of Aspiration started on the outskirts of the village with a few simple huts, although they were luxurious compared to those of Kulapalayam, as the walls and floors were made of cement, and they had running water and toilets. The lives of the people of Kulapalayam were irrevocably impacted by the arrival of this community of foreigners, at first mainly from France, but later representing several nationalities, right next to their village. Some families were more involved with Aspiration, as the new community was called, than others, sending their children to be educated along with children from many other countries, and working along with the new Aurovilians planting trees, and building up the infrastructure for their community. Shankar's family had less contact with Aspiration than many, but Shankar remembers how he and other children in the village used to tease the foreigners, when they rode through the village on their bicycles. He also remembers envying some of his village friends, who were becoming fluent in English.

Shankar's father was fairly prosperous. He owned seventeen cows, so his mother sold milk to the people who didn't own a cow. She also sold eggs, as the family kept a few chickens, and she was very good at selecting which grains of varagu, ragi, millets and peanuts would make good seeds for the next year's planting, so she sold seeds as well.

Schooling

At the age of five his parents sent him to the government school in Kulapalayam, not because they believed that education was a good thing, but because of the free lunch. Also, because there were six children in the family, his mother needed to have them out of the house for a few hours. Shankar got up before 5:00 because, before leaving for school, he had to collect grass from the surrounding fields for the cows. After a couple of years he did a brief stint in a school for village children in the Auroville community of Pitchandikulam, and then returned to the local government school.

He became more serious about school when he started studying at the government school in Muthialpet, close to Pondicherry, at the age of ten. He studied hard to avoid being beaten by the teacher who kept order in the large class of fifty students with a big stick. As a result he obtained good marks, and in his village he was often called to read invitations, letters and documents as most of the adults were illiterate.

Life Changing Experience

In the eleventh grade he had a life changing experience. He had a teacher who loved the Tamil language and literature, and awakened a similar love in Shankar. Now he studied hard because he loved the literature,

especially poetry, and language of his people and wanted to understand it in depth. After completing high school, he attended the Tagore Arts College in Pondicherry, where he got a BA in economics, having been advised that a degree in economics would more likely lead to a good job than a degree in Tamil.

Then Shankar's father said he would not support him further unless he settled down, got married and took over the family farm. As this was not the life he wanted, Shankar had to find another place to live. An Aurovilian to whom he delivered milk advised him to meet Meenakshi, who ran Ilaignarkal School for the workers of Auroville. She gave him a place to live in the school, and a late-afternoon job, teaching illiterate workers how to read and write. She paid him Rs160 a month and it was enough for him to enroll in a master's program in economics.

Getting to Know Aurovilians

Around the same time he was invited to Centre Guest House where he came into contact with several Aurovilians, who were native English speakers. They wanted to learn Tamil, and asked Shankar to be their teacher. After the class Shankar would be invited to have his dinner at the Guest House. Shankar is still teaching Tamil as a second language, and hundreds of grateful Aurovilians and others remember these classes as an important part of their learning how to speak to and interact with the local people.

Shankar had written the exams for his BA in Tamil, but for the Master's degree he was required to write the exams in English, and for the first time in his life he failed an exam. His English was not good enough to express what he understood and wanted to say. So he turned to some of his English-speaking Tamil students for help, and soon was able to express himself well enough to get an MA and later an M. Phil.

Shankar, the Tamil teacher

Upon graduation, he began to teach Tamil at Auroville's Last School both as a first and second language. Not used to the rebellious ways of the non-Tamil children, he was shocked on his first day when the students told him to teach them while they were sitting in a tree. Fortunately another teacher intervened and order was restored. Some of these students went on to become fluent in Tamil, and upstanding citizens of Auroville! He later did a training program in second language teaching at the University of Mysore and a semester of teacher training at Antioch University in New Hampshire, USA. He gave an orientation in Tamil language and culture during six sessions at the University of Washington in Seattle and Bothell, USA,

Shankar officially joined Auroville in 1995, and continued teaching in Last School until he was invited by the Aikiyam School Support Group to become the principal of that school in 2006. The combination of coming from the same background as the children, understanding their individual circumstances, his educational and multi-cultural background, and his natural warmth make Shankar uniquely suited for the job of school principal.