

Newsletter

Auroville Village Action Group

Kabaddi tournament and sports training for women and men

AVAG focuses on women's empowerment through training and capacity building, sustainable livelihood programs and social enterprise initiatives for the local women.

We wanted to go one step further towards the social empowerment and agency of the women –which could even lead to future career opportunities and hence, economic empowerment– through a program of local sports events and coaching.

Cultural limitations and traditions stop women from playing sports, which they do not normally have access to after marriage, or even after attaining puberty. However, the benefits of sports are endless: from having the power to bring people of different groups together to compete on a friendly platform, to helping individuals build leadership skills, as well as enhancing their self-esteem, courage and self-confidence.

After AVAG realised that whenever we organised the traditional Kabaddi game, the women would participate with a lot of enthusiasm, we discussed with the Federation the idea of organising and hosting an inter-village Kabaddi tournament for women in March and give proper coaching to the women interested. 31 women self-help groups signed in and 24 actually participated. The referees, women government coaches, said that it was the first time they saw such a big number of women participating and that they could provide training for them. They selected the 45 best players to get further coaching that would lead to regular competitions on local, district and regional level. The women chosen were jubilant, as being selected gives them recognition in their SHG and villages. From the men side, the best players had been already selected by Auroville Bioregional Sports Club Association.

Out of the 45 women, 30 missed the training sessions, because the coaching is on Sundays, when the entire family is at home and they have to take care of them. The other 15 women have to wake up very early to do their household duties, and travel a long distance. AVAG provides them with breakfast and hopes to also cover the traveling expenses. Now for the first time, these women and men are getting to participate at the district level competition to be held in September.

The project is hoped to contribute to social change in the villages by boosting women's empowerment and agency, as well as to create career opportunities in sports for local women and girls.

In the villages, there are no sports role models for the women and children so

About us

Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has worked in the Bioregion of Auroville since 1983 to promote village development and empowerment, by way of programmes in the areas of Community Development, Economic Development, Capacity Building, and Psychosocial Services, which are executed through an expanding network of self-help groups (SHGs), a Federation of male and female leaders and the Paalam. The emphasis is not on charity or service, but co-development with villagers to cultivate the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to build a better future for all.



Highlights 2017-2018

- 329 women and men joined the 19 newly formed SHGs.
- AVAG hosted 16 Federation and 31 SHG meetings, 8 seminars, 24 Inter-caste exchange programs with 987 participants, 27 work camps involving 889 participants and 29 medical camps benefiting 2357 people.
- In addition, there were 39 cluster meetings with 1415 attendants.
- SHG members saved Cr. 6.3 and borrowed Cr. 11.1.

AVAG looks at these activities as empowering tools. Since sports is regarded as a field for men, women's participation can begin to change community norms about their roles and capacities and provide positive female role models for other women. In fact, around 20 adolescent girls from our area have shown interest to come for sports coaching also.

The women are really looking for opportunities to show their talents and get recognition!

“We want to be the model for the married women of our region in sports. By seeing our success more AVAG SHG members may come forward to participate in sports”
Mrs. Poorani, 31, Bommiyarpalayam



Health camps

AVAG, in coordination with PIMS Hospital, has been conducting a series of health camps in the surrounding villages of Auroville for almost one year, with the aim to improve the health of the local people.

General health camps are held once a week in 2 villages simultaneously. The local people get free consultations, free medicines and, if they need further tests or scans, they are referred to PIMS Hospital to have them done for free. Although the doctors see women and men of all ages and backgrounds, the camps are directed particularly to children - as good health in early age is critical to the adequate physical and cognitive development of the kids - and to women, because women do not go to the doctor normally and they do not spend money on their health, as they tend to prioritise the other members of the family and their needs.

This initiative - where the local leaders and the members of the self-help groups and the Paalam play a key role, ensuring that the camps go smoothly and without incidents -, has benefited around 3300 patients so far this year.

In addition, one-day eye camps are being held once or twice a month in several villages. On an average, 100 patients benefit per camp by getting free consultation, medicines and eye tests, and a referral letter to PIMS Hospital if further treatment or scanning is needed. Moreover, the local people are able to purchase spectacles at a lower price. While cataract operation is done free of cost, other eye surgeries are offered at a subsidised rate.

Experience rural Tamil Nadu

This year, AVAG started organising a series of guided visits to different neighbouring villages it is working in, to raise awareness of the rural realities among the people residing in or visiting Auroville.

This initiative allows the participants to have direct interaction with the villagers and have a better understanding of their lifestyle, social dynamics, culture and traditions, and of the issues that surrounding rural communities face; with a view to develop a greater sense of empathy and solidarity. During these visits, AVAG also has the chance to present the impact of our work on the life of the people we work with.

The programme was designed with the support of the Self-Help Group (SHG) members and the leaders of the villages.

So far, three different groups of people from Auroville have participated in these exposure visits. The visitors are given a general orientation of rural Tamil Nadu, where the leaders and SHG members share the realities existing in their settlements. For the women it is a moment of pride to share the importance of women's clubs for them, individually, and for their communities. The leaders talk about the organisation of the village and the temple festival. Then, the participants are taken on a guided tour around the village by AVAG staff and some SHG members, where they walk through the different sections of the hamlet, experiencing its social structure, diversity, contradictions and cultural richness.



AVVAI Summer Camp

As every year, AVAG hosted its five-week-long summer camp, for 35 students in the age group of 12-17 years. The camp, attended by both boys and girls, aims to provide a supplementary education program, capacity development and leadership based on values that build inner supports for young people to face the world at large. The initiative of including the boys in the camp was well embraced and we were delighted to see all students working as a team, supporting each other and participating actively in all the discussions. The curriculum included spoken English, drawing, painting, drama, dancing, sports and games, public speaking discussions on discrimination, nutrition, first-aid, leadership qualities, difficulties at home and career guidance.

“Because of this summer camp I learned how to think out of the box and I have much more self-confidence” B. Preethi, 17, Rayapudupakkam

While they openly spoke about the discriminations based on gender, caste, appearance, educational level and the type of school (English Medium/Tamil Medium), to our surprise, all the students from scheduled caste communities mentioned having experienced caste-based discrimination.

The program also aims to expose them to new avenues that are beyond academic purposes, done by way of field visits to different Auroville Units. They experienced silence and concentration at the Matrimandir and were told about unity between the people of different parts of the world. At Eco Service, they learned about the importance of reducing packaging and recycling and the disastrous environmental consequences the waste has on the soil and water bodies. The Solar kitchen gave them the opportunity to experience a different kind of food and flavours.

We hope the messages given get internalised and used in their lives. Children can play an important role as agents of change and this initiative is a good opportunity to raise awareness on social and environmental issues and maybe plant a seed for more environmentally sustainable and socially just practices among these girls and boys, and get spread to their families.

“Here we learned many things that are not in the books”

“I am a very shy person but when I came here, I started participating in many group discussions, giving my opinion. By taking part in all activities little by little I overcame my shyness and finally came out of my shell”

E. Sarika, 16, Alankuppam



Anjali and AVAL

As you all know, AVAG is actively involved in assisting AVAL, the social enterprise created to guarantee a sustainable livelihood to women from different castes and backgrounds, following their training in Advanced Tailoring and Crochet. Among other outlets, AVAL's products are sold at Anjali, in Auroville's Visitors Centre. At the moment, this outlet is being revamped into a permanent shop, which means a temporary suspension of sales, but we expect the new shop to better showcase the AVAL products and the purpose of the social enterprise, that is: to empower disadvantaged women socially and economically and make a shift in the current social dynamics. Likewise, efforts are being made to promote AVAL, to better express the purpose and the ideals of the social enterprise. We want to emphasise the ethical aspect of the project by stressing the social and economic responsibility and sustainability behind it. AVAL is for sustainable livelihoods, financial independence, caste integration, women working together and increased self-confidence. The new tags, catalogue and look book will speak more about the dignified conditions in which the women work, their fair living wages and the added value brought by artisanal production; but also about their personal stories, the fact that they themselves own this initiative and the impact that it has had on their lives.

And there is more...

- AVAG got a grant from Stichting De Zaaier Board to train 12 more women to join AVAL. Training has started.
- A new designer from NID, Archana, has joined for a period of two months in which she will create a new collection for AVAL.



Walk of Hope

On the 28th and 29th of January, AVAG partnered with Restorative Auroville to organise a “Walk of Hope”: a peace initiative which aims to spread the message of oneness, inclusion and respect and which emphasises that what unifies us as human beings is more fundamental than what separates us. AVAG took the responsibility in mobilising the neighbouring villages to join the event and to host the participants while they walked through their villages. The walk was led by Sri M, a spiritual guide, social activist, educationist and father of the first “Walk of Hope” which covered 7500 km from Kanyakumari to Kashmir in 2015. The itinerary covered 10km from Irumbai Temple through the neighbouring villages to Aikiyam School in New Creation. Around 700 people participated.



Women's Day

AVAG has always encouraged the women from the SHGs to arrange Women’s Day celebrations in their own villages. This 8th of March, again, many groups organised collective festivals which included performances, games, sports and food. Organising events for Women’s Day celebrations is, itself, a means to bring solidarity among women and to sensitise them around the issues they face. In addition, to participate in such performances and games is a big cultural breakthrough as, traditionally, married women are discouraged from being on the stage in public.



Meet our Team

Although the volunteering time of our German volunteer from Weltwaerts, Camilla, came to an end, Julia and Konrad, from the same program, have just joined AVAG.

Part of our now big family are also the long-term volunteer from Spain, Vania, who has been working with us since February and newcomer Marcia. Amal, from Meghalaya, joined AVAG at the end of July to help with AVAG’s look book and Shrimayee, from Delhi, came at mid-August to be part of the fundraising group.

Archana, from Assam, and Sumanth, from Bangalore just joined the team, also composed by Aurovilians Angela and Madhu and our directors, Anbu and Moris.

How can you help?

Should you be interested in supporting our work you can do so:

- 1) In kind, volunteering for some time for the organisation by contacting Anbu or Angela at avagoffice@auroville.org.in
- 2) Through financial contributions. Donations will be routed through the Auroville Unity Fund. Please specify the project name as “Auroville Village Action Group” to make sure AVAG receives your contribution.

Auroville Unity Fund Account Number: 10237876508

SWIFT CODE: SBININBB474

Bank: State Bank of India

Branch name: Auroville International Township

Branch Code: 03160