



Pudiyador Times

Apr. 2016

An Interview With Udayan Phillip



Meet Udayan Philip, the outgoing program manager of Pudiyador's Young Adult Program (YAP). Udayan (UD) started working with us in September 2015 as part of a 10 month fellowship via The American Indian Foundation (AIF).

Last year, AIF chose 30 chose fellows (20 American, 10 Indian) and placed them in participating NGOs and social programs across India. Udayan's fellowship ended in the summer of 2016.

Priya Prabhakaran (PP), newsletter designer extraordinaire at Pudiyador, chats with Udayan to share his YAP journey with us.



An Interview With Udayan Phillip



PP: Could you describe your role at Pudiyador?

UD: My role had multiple facets: I managed a team of three teachers from the community of Ururkuppam and surrounding fishermen villages. Here, I focussed on weekly curriculum development: what activity we will focus on and why, which teachers will come in when, and how often we would have counselling sessions and home visits.

I also worked directly in the field with the kids. Often if a kid stopped coming in to the center, it wasn't necessarily because he/she did not want to come. There's always a story and our team tried to identify the root cause.

When I first started working, I expected that the kids would simply come to the program. It turned out that about 50% of my time was spent in coaxing the kids to come.

PP: What are the main issues involved with children's attendance?

UD: The YAP children are teenagers. Some needed more focused academic help while the others simply did not do well in structure. The younger ones often need more structure and the older ones resisted it. Often times what the teens demanded conflicted with Pudiyador's aims. For example, playing Ultimate Frisbee every day and not having any other activities! So we needed to restructure activities and modified our approach to maximize our reach.



An Interview With Udayan Phillip

We banded some of the teens into an Ultimate Frisbee Team*. They wanted to be the best youth team in Chennai and I motivated them to be the best they could, both on and off the field.

We jointly built a team charter which had a set of responsibilities. For example, if they wanted to be part of this team, as per the team charter, they couldn't smoke or chew tobacco (a rampant issue among teenagers in this community). During the week, we offered two days of Ultimate and two days of academics.

Ururkuppam also presents its own unique set of challenges- the community is on the beach, a place where kids feel like they own the world. That was the biggest challenge facing our program: how to get them from the beach to inside a classroom/group activity.

Some of our teens live and breathe Ultimate. Ultimate was already very present in the community. A couple of kids went to London last year and the Indian coach for the national team is from here. There is a huge sense of pride around Ultimate and that was an effective tool in getting the kids interested.



An Interview With Udayan Phillip



PP: Can you explain a little bit about your work with gender awareness?

UD: Gender equality and balance is a distant dream that we are constantly struggling towards attaining. A big challenge in our parts of the world and particularly in Pudiyador communities is that once girls hit puberty, their parents become more restrictive. Girls aren't allowed to talk to boys, or to even step outside the house without permission or a chaperone. Parents are more open and comfortable when girls are younger, but it all changes abruptly when a girl gets her first period.

It is in some ways easier in the Ururkuppam community because of the prevalence of Ultimate. Ultimate, being an inclusive sport, requires mixed teams to have a minimum of 4-men 3-women in each team. The onus is on each team to recruit girls, and that in itself is a huge step towards gender equality. In most other ways, we see a lot of segregation within classrooms and outside in their lives. Once teens come into contact with the opposite sex, they don't know how to be with each other.

An Interview With Udayan Phillip

We try to change that by holding sessions on gender topics especially during summer camp. Sessions on what it means to be a boy/girl, challenging gender stereotypes; basically focused group discussions, with certain aims in mind.

Despite a lot of hurdles in realizing our plans for gender work, but implementation has been challenging due to way society here is structured. We are making quite a bit of progress, nevertheless. When I came in, we had about 9 kids and no girls in the program, and now we have about 15 kids and 5 girls. We are trying to improve that (*as of Aug 2016, we have 10 girls!*).



PP: Have you observed a difference in the home situation of the kids since you've been here?

UD: There are a lot of problems at home for these kids. We recently had a theater session where each group had a topic to present around the theme of family interactions like 'family issues', 'alcoholism', and 'going to school'.

Violence was prevalent in the representation of every theme. It was very real and terrifying to see what these kids were going through/showing us. They were acting, of course, but a lot of the kids were laughing at these same situations that horrified me. They are so desensitised to this and that is pretty sad. Going forward, Pudiyador should focus efforts in that direction.



An Interview With Udayan Phillip

On the other hand, we entered people's homes and talked about their children during our home visits: how they are doing in class and update the parents on the child's progress. What we noticed is that all parents wanted the best for their children. No parent didn't care. The reality is that most parents are not home a lot - they are either on the beach or in a fishing stall working.

We now have a new person coming into Pudiyador to replace me, and she's awesome. She speaks Tamil, and the kids have already built a great relationship with her. My hope is for Pudiyador and the Young Adult Program to be a place where the kids feel safe and valued.



PP: How is Pudiyador received in the Ururkuppam/fishermen's community?

UD: Pudiyador is well-respected in the community. All the parents in the community (over 400 families) don't know about it well enough to want to send their kids here. So we still spend time on awareness building and I believe we can do more there.



PP: What did you hope to get out of this experience, and did you achieve that?

UD: Initially I had to choose- I could either do one thing and do it well, like teach English for 10 months with a large measurable impact. Or, I could create multiple small foundations at a programmatic level and have a different sort of impact.

An Interview With Udayan Phillip



When I came in, I had a vision document that outlined plans- that by the end of 10 months, we would transform the kids into emotionally intelligent, versatile, and compassionate people. That's great but a bit naive. You can't transform things just like that in a short span. That's something I've learned but am pretty disappointed about. I simply couldn't move the needle as far as I wanted to in the timeframe.

On the positive side, I've built great relationships with the kids and feel very loved and well-received.

Personally, I've grown a lot. You can read about stuff, but only when you're involved in it, you know what it is.

Udayan finished his tenure with Pudiyador in the summer of 2016.



Quarter Highlights



The children have been exploring the TirukkuRaL, considered one of the greatest works ever written on ethics and morality and known for its universality and non-denominational nature, by Tiruval Luvar (circa 4th century BC).

The Nalanda Way Foundation partnered with us to conduct a 4-day camp for our children. Activities included visual art by self portrait, making puppetry, identification of feelings with colours, photography sessions on the themes of community and friendship



Eight of our children choreographed, planned, and held a dance performance for their parents and the community in Urur Kuppam. It was a soothing experience for all involved, especially after the cyclone.

We kick-started a new technique to increase parent participation in Pudiyador: We invited parents to come to our centers at a pre-specified time of their choice, and have individual discussions about their children. This is turning out to be successful so far!

