

PUVIDHAM
Educating for Sustainability
ANNUAL REPORT 22-23

Puvudham, Nagarkoodal village, Dharmapuri, 636803. Tamilnadu, INDIA.
www.puvudham.in Ph.09600491176 & 9585759184. Email: puvudham@gmail.com

Introduction: Puvudham is a space for self-sustainable living, zero wastage lifestyle and work-based education. Freedom for thought and action allow adults and children to be happy and learn more, naturally. The attempt is to retain the intrinsic sensitivity, mindfulness, and curiosity of the children. The focus is on nurturing the development of self-reliance by grooming our behavior and helping us to understand our responsibilities. We are endeavoring to cultivate a conscience in children and adults alike through empathy, trust, and love. The questions often asked are “Who am I?” “What am I on this earth for?” “How can I live harmoniously with my community and the natural environment?” “What are my needs?” “How much is enough?” “How can we live without worries about money?” “How can we become self-reliant?”.

The challenge: In the face of climate change, all governments are seeking solutions to ensure that action is taken towards trying to reduce the rise in temperatures through change in consumption patterns and conscious action towards reducing waste and emission of toxic gases. The major pollutants of our lifestyle are the Fuel and Energy industry; Agriculture and food processing industry; the fashion industry; the construction industry and the food retail industry. All of us are consumers of these basic needs and therefore changing the pattern of consumption and changing the lifestyle will definitely reduce the pollution. This is what more and more people are understanding and are therefore looking for alternative ways of life and inspiration to find the courage to make the shift. Individuals and families who have enough awareness about the impact of their everyday choices on the possibility of continuation of human life on this planet are feeling helpless and lost. At Puvudham they find solace in the fact that it is possible to regenerate land; it is possible to live happily with minimum resources and that they do not have to worry about their children’s future in terms of what job they will have but in terms of what resources we are leaving for them to live a happy life.



The need of the hour: A lot of people have realized the need to pause and see if we are doing the right thing by our children and future generations. Puvudham is a destination that they come to for



inspiration and for understanding the challenges that they will face while transitioning to a sustainable way of life. Many parents are realizing that there is something wrong with the way the schools are approaching education of their children. There is a growing concern for emotional wellbeing.

The Team: *Ms Meenakshi Umesh*, an architect by training, a Permaculture consultant and farmer by passion, and an Applied Psychologist by practice, is the founder and managing trustee of Puvudham Rural Development Trust. She left Mumbai in 1988 and moved to Auroville, an international community near Pondichery, in response to the above questions. She couldn't see any meaning in way of life that she saw in Mumbai. It was a pathway for more and more suffering and surely not the only means for survival. She moved to this remote village in Dharmapuri district of Tamilnadu in 1992 to live a life of freedom from toxic food, chlorinated water and polluted air.

She wanted to give her children the basic amenities for survival in their purest form. Being an Architect, she learnt to build with mud and built her own house and the subsequent school buildings all with mud as the primary material.

Mr G Madhavaraj joined as a learner in Puvudham Learning Centre in January 2000. He had just passed his BBA exam and was looking for opportunities locally to support his parents on their farm. He came to learn English and teach Tamil to Meenakshi's children and ended up enjoying the journey of learning. He is now the treasurer, administrator, farm supervisor and facilitator for our **"Science for Sustainability"** workshop every month.

Mr. Kumar S, a mechanic who has fallen in love with the forest that he came to look after, has since planted 1500 more trees in lands of different farmers and has collected seeds of indigenous species. He has a good knowledge about indigenous trees and herbs.

Nivas M an alumnus of Puvudham who has finished his graduation in Agriculture came to help us with our herb and indigenous trees nursery. He is running a Nursery where he uses organic applications to nurture plants. This year for the birthday of every child we planted only fruit trees. Every year we plant trees for the birthday of the children but they are mostly timber trees. He taught the children how to do grafting and air layering to create saplings by vegetative propagation.

Naveen Kumar joined in June to facilitate the NABARD supported project for Development of Sustainable Farming Practices in Nagarkoodal panchayat of Dharmapuri district. He formed a group of 20 farmers who decided to try out organic farming of millets and vegetables on small plots as a trial. He is now well versed in Bio dynamic preparations and applications. We continue to work with other farmers and extend support of organic applications and tree saplings through the trust.

Krishnadevi and *Murugamanickam* came as parents to provide the puvudham learning environment for their two daughters and are now staying with the children in the hostel. From being parents to two children, they are now parenting 22 children! Krishnadevi takes classes for the online support to homeschoolers and unschoolers that we provide through our social entrepreneurship MUDHIVE. She is an electronic engineer and has taken up the role of a facilitator for the "Science for Sustainability" workshop for children

Sini M C, an electrical engineer from Kerala, who is a toymaker and a passionate follower of Arvind Gupta (<https://www.arvindguptatoys.com/toys.html>) comes every month to help the children to make things and learn concepts of science and social science.

Simi Joseph, from Idukki, Kerala, came to Puvudham in December to learn about sustainable living practices and stayed back. She has now eased into the role of the hostel warden and is enthusiastically leading our cloth up cycling unit providing new ideas and designs.

The children are an integral part of the team. Each of them is engaged in productive activities that help them learn the importance of physical labour to create everything that is needed to nurture our lives starting from food to clothes to homes!



Return to the soil- A 2-day workshop for parents who want to change their way of life

and inspire children to lead a healthy life and care for the planet:

During the two days that the parents and other adults who wish to work with children learn how to listen to the child. They learn that trying to make the child listen to them is impossible if they do not model the listening! The discussions revolve around what children need to learn and how they go about learning things.



The adults and their children arrive on Friday evening around 6.00 pm. The first session is an orientation to the use of our dry composting toilet. Meenakshi explains why the composting toilet is the only way to return the nutrients which we take as food from the soil back to the soil. The discussion revolves around the essence of the cyclic nature of resources. What is taken from the soil should be returned to it. Mixing water in human poo is the main reason for the growth of pathogens. We talk about the manual scavenging and sewer cleaning that is still the norm in our cities and towns. Meenakshi asks the participants if any one of them would do the work of cleaning sewers even if they were paid exorbitant sums of money. The discussion ends with acknowledging the inhumanity of our system where we expect someone to do what we would never do for any amount of money! The next morning the participants wake up at 4.30 am as per the regular schedule at Puvudham and partake in all the activities of cooking, cleaning and yoga. After dawn they go along with the children who stay at Puvudham and join in the routine work of gardening, cleaning of living spaces and toilets, caring for animals like dogs, cats, hens, ducks, goats or cows, cleaning their sheds and feeding them!

Science for Sustainability– an 8-day workshop for children to be Self-reliant, build knowledge using their observation skills, and acquire leadership skills:

Following the workshop for adults, we have a workshop for children. The parents leave their kids at Puvudham for a week. During the week, children learn to handle tools, fit bulbs and tube lights into their holders, basics of cooking, cleaning, caring, and gardening. They also learn how to dismantle and refit a cycle. Food science is one of the things they connect with. There are discussions on- what we



must eat; how we must eat; when we must eat and why we must eat vegetables and whole grains. There are sessions on cooking and its connection with mathematics; science and its connection with gardening; social science and its connection with our everyday lifestyle; language and its connection with our confidence, creativity and self-expression. The children learn to lead their lives with dignity and value their environment. In the 8 days they learn about their capabilities, their limitations, their strengths and their fears. They are taught how to face their fears, overcome their laziness, stand up for their friends, question what is wrong and work on themselves to become better and better. Walking alone for about a km in the dark to let go of the fear of darkness is one of the most exciting activities! Walking 8 kms to see COOP Forest, an indigenous forest created on 300 acres of land is the other activity which is rewarded by swimming in the stream that has been regenerated there!



Nirmal Govindraju and Gurpreet of EIKAS Foundation do sessions during our science workshop. The wonderful thing is that instead of teaching concepts to the kids, they evolve the concept logically through observation and involve each and every child in the process of knowledge creation. A child needs to feel connected to the topic and the only way to do that is to have open discussions around the topic and guide them tenderly to the concept.

Meenakshi does the Lead your life and Face your fears session mostly during the evenings. There is a lot of talk about ghosts and we invite the children to look for ghosts. After a while as we talk, the children themselves arrive at the conclusion that ghost are only in our heads. Each of them decides to face one fear per day and then let it go. ***The liberation they feel after they have conquered each fear is to be seen to be believed!*** They feel empowered and capable of facing anything that life gives!



Spending time observing and drawing in nature is one way of expanding the children's horizons of self-learning. As a child discovers that he/she can create knowledge and question hypothesis, they feel the power of their intuition reuniting with their conscience! ***Once the inner voice and inner light of the child are enabled through the process of self-discovery and self-knowledge, nothing can stop them from doing their best!*** There is no need of competition or appreciation to fuel the need to learn!

Another very important aspect of learning is the ability to wonder! To reignite this in a child, the child needs to listen. To listen the child needs to be silent. And silence is most absorbing when we are in nature! A child that can spend time alone and is conversant with the process of analytical thinking and logical thinking can discover new scientific facts that were so far not known. Articulating a hypothesis, experimenting to discover truth is science. ***Science is the realm of intuition not the rote memory of facts!***



Workshops for other institutions in soil and water conservation and sustainable living:

The pandemic has made it clear that unless we change our ways there is no hope for the human race on this planet. We shall be another species that became extinct. There is more focus now on self-reliant living skills and Emotional wellbeing. We take sessions for children and adults about the importance of soil and its conservation. We discuss about the water cycle and the pollutants of water. The focus is on individual change to inspire more individuals to change! We discuss the



role of the human being in the ecosystem. After some deliberation we all agree that the one thing that distinguishes humans from other animals is their ability to create something using their body. The simple path to achieve our purpose in life as humans is to indulge in making things we need.

In the capitalist economy the greed to consume has replaced the need to create. This has made us less sensitive to our environment and consequentially insensitive to ourselves and other living beings!



Common sense dictates that the earth is our home and polluting our home and destroying our resources faster than they can regenerate would bring about our own destruction. But still we have people who believe that they can colonize Mars and save the human race! That AI will find solutions to all the problems of climate change! If we do not take responsibility for our actions and redefine what a good life is for us, it is very unlikely that humans survive.

Teacher awareness in Social Emotional Learning:



Along with Eikas foundation we did a number of workshops for teachers who were facing difficulties in the classroom with their teenagers. During the pandemic teenagers got to experience the freedom of time. They discovered aspects of themselves that they did not know existed as they got bored sitting inside their houses. Their minds found the time to question the routines of schools and the norms of society. As a result teenagers became resistant to school regimen. As we spoke to the teachers about these issues, together they arrived at the solution that they needed to change their

approach to the students. They needed to become their friends and understand their frustrations while supporting them through their struggle to face life and the social expectations that were forced on them. The teachers realized that there was a need to work along with the parents to establish a good working relationship with them and nurture the child together. In case of parents who were not mature enough to understand how their attitudes were becoming a burden for their children, the onus of becoming a role model fell on the teacher. Teachers from **Teach for India** came for experiencing the role of sustainable living practice in education for climate change. Teachers from **Natraj Gurukul** in Darjeeling came for a week long immersion. Many other visitors came to share their learning with us.



Online school and curriculum sharing with homeschoolers and unschoolers:



the year of the pandemic, many parents requested us to conduct online classes. At first we were skeptical about screen time and its effects. Later we reconciled to the idea and proposed the online class as a learning for the whole family to become more conscious of their choices and make a shift in their lifestyle. We proposed a minimalistic lifestyle with conscious consumerism of local products to ensure good health of the family and livelihood generation in the region.

Since 2021 we have had around 160 children in the online classes. The whole family was engaged in garbage segregation, composting of wet waste, making of hygiene products like Bio Enzymes, soaps, tooth powder, and shampoos. They have DE cluttered their homes and their minds and adopted a minimalistic lifestyle. The classes are as per 4 distinct age groups: 3-5 years; 5-7 years; 7-10 years and 9-14 years. The classes for age group up to 7 years are attended by the primary care giver, the child is not expected to sit in front of the screen. For older children we have 3 classes per week of one hour each. The classes are not in the form of lessons to be delivered, but in the form of stories to be shared, songs to be sung and activities to be done. The children are involved in dialogue and the values of sustainability are absorbed through the conversation and by modeling the behavior we want the child to copy. The attendance is not compulsory and travel to villages and working with farmers is encouraged.

Learning Facilitators Course: To be able to deliver the online classes, as per the philosophy and pedagogy of Puvudham we had started a teacher training program in June 2020. 45 young people took the course and we engaged five of them as facilitators for the online classes towards making *Education For Sustainability* the norm in households that are looking for meaningful education for their children within their homes. These programs are propagated through our Social Enterprise MUDHIVE. The course is now a pre-recorded self-paced course for five months. It is designed to help adults understand the process of learning through introspection and mindfulness.

Volunteering and Internship Program:



Every month we have around 2 volunteers that help us learn something that they have mastered and learn from our way of life to live closer to the processes in nature and learn how to integrate them into their understanding of sustainability. Rupesh Gesota from Mumbai taught some fun math. Denis Barwa taught drawing and dance. Some taught crafts and some taught English.

The internship program brought Kanya from Madurai to Puvudham and she spent 3 months learning how to engage children in meaningful explorative learning. Sayani from West Bengal came to learn about our curriculum and is now helping us make it digital while doing the illustrations for the activities to make them self-explanatory. Koteeswaran has now been with us for 6 months and has taken up the wood craft activity full time. He has made one set of our puzzles and now is designing new toys. He also takes class for the children helping them to make useful things like soap boxes and key chains from coconut shells.

Puvidham campus- A Resource Centre for Self-reliant and sustainable living: After the covid 19 break, we decided not to have a full-fledged school. The children of local parents were under pressure from their parents to get government jobs so that the family's respect and financial status would improve. While we were talking to the children about minimalistic lifestyle and the concept of enough, their parents were talking about access to more material goods. It was a losing battle. During Covid and after that we found that a lot of families were looking for alternatives to the current lifestyle and consumerism patterns. We decided to extend our learning to them. The online school was a way of sharing our philosophy and practice with parents who were in alignment with the basic principles of Sustainability. We felt it was much better to interact with those who are looking for alternatives than to push our philosophy to the local parents who anyway lived a minimalistic life. So after some deliberation we decide to open out our campus to other government school and private school children as an experiential space where they can spend 3 to 8 days learning about alternatives. The school is now a micro-school where we still accept children who have been rejected by the system as deficient or children whose parents are convinced that they want their children to be completely self-reliant and stress free. So we have been reorganizing our spaces to cater to 50 children at a time with five different activities-

1. Science Lab – where we have set up all the experiments that are needed to be performed from class 6 to class 10.
2. A wood craft workshop and makers space where machines and tools are provided for children to build anything they would like to with some assistance.
3. A space where the complete process of cloth making is available for children to engage with including spinning, weaving, dyeing and up cycling and repurposing of old clothes.
4. Organic farming including preparation of organic fertilizers and pest repellants.
5. Food is medicine – Edible wild herbs and their role in the health of our body and mind.

There could be a skill development component and a leadership development component too!

Renovation of Vault structure: This structure was built in 2018-19 but some renovation needed



to be done because part of it had collapsed in a rain before it was properly finished since it is made completely with mud and local brick. With support from IDA AND KIRUPAKARAN MANICKAM Foundation from Chennai, we were able to replaster and rebuild parts that were damaged. This structure is going to be used to create a space where complete processing of cotton to cloth is

made visible to educated children and to skill them to spin and weave their own fabric.

ASHA FOR EDUCATION and CHINMAYA MISSION of Niagara falls supported us through their PRUTHVI SEVA project to continue to make the Puvidham Campus into a science park where human powered machines are created and used to make mundane work easy without using fossil fuel. We also supported young farmers to encourage them to pursue organic farming with the fund.

Home and Beyond! In Feb we collaborated with a group of young people to make our sustainable campus available for adults to learn about construction with mud. Architects Dheeraj and Sourabh, environmentalists Aryan and Mayank, Electrical Engineer Isnish and Journalist and illustrator Sayani came to Puvidham. They felt that the campus was a space where all the aspects of sustainable living had been practiced for 20 years. It was now time to share with others and help them integrate their lives with nature to be able to feel the connection with it and with other beings while inspiring their children to self-learn and explore at their pace. We did a workshop called Home and Beyond from 24th February to 5th march where mud construction, soil and water conservation, identification of local herbs and cooking millets was all rolled into one dynamic workshop!

Exposure trips: Travel is a great way to learn about oneself and about the environment. Long treks for observing birds and the flora and fauna of our place are an important part of education at Puvudham. We did a trip with the children who are permanent residents of Puvudham and a couple of volunteers in May to Chitra and Ramesh's farm near Kutralam falls in Tirunelveli. As always we ended up cleaning the falls area of plastics involving the children of the village. It became an awareness session for all those who were watching. We requested them not to litter in nature. Then in September was the Ahimsa Santhai at Madurai and we participated with all our children. We were there to teach other children during the 4 day market up cycling of cloth led by Krishnadevi, coconut craft led by Koteeswaran, toys from waste lead by Sini and herbs for health led by Thiru. The children were appreciated and given gifts of books and bags.



Media attention and interviews:

Many students and researchers have had interviews with Meenakshi to understand the philosophy and practice at Puvudham. The Dharmapuri doordarshan honoured Meenakshi with the women's day special news. A lot of young people interviewed and shared the same on their channels.

<https://www.travellersuniversity.org/post/puvudham-a-university-for-sustainable-living>

<https://vikalpsangam.org/article/puvudham-a-university-for-sustainable-living/>

<https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/news/2022/science-in-puvudham-an-experience-towards-love-for-earth>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gd25sDR1kQ> Learning through intuition

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIQkG4c4ATQ>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyYMACzy_Po

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSRhmw9dnIg> Food is medicine – part 1

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtxIcNWGD_I Food is medicine – part 2

The Puvudham Organic Farm: Climate change has affected the rainfall pattern in our region in a very strange way. For the last three years we have had more than our average rainfall of the last 30 years. We are able to grow only paddy in the kharif season because there is too much water and the land is converted to a marsh. Last year we used this change to grow enough paddy for a few years. All the workshop participants, volunteers and the children who live here worked in the paddy fields preparing the fields, transplanting and weeding and finally harvesting the paddy and threshing it!



We have also taken the opportunity to plant around 1200 indigenous species of trees on the Puvudham land in Miyawaki forest pattern and fruit trees creating a Permaculture food forest. Normally the Miyawaki forest planting is very resource intensive. For us we realised that we use the concept of close planting but without the deep digging and compost addition into the soil. Our Miyawaki plantation is spread over 3 acres and is interspersed with older trees. For the fruit trees we have installed a drip irrigation system. While for the forest species we have embedded a pipe of 2 feet length along with the sapling while planting. The water is given into the pipe and reaches the roots directly. We water them for one year and then let them be. We have a survival rate of around 70 percent and slowly with this planting out humble 16 acres is green!

Supporting farmers to transition to Organic farming: With the support of NABARD we reached out to 20 farmers and helped them to learn Bio dynamic farming and practice organic farming on one acre each. They grew millets, various indigenous paddy strains, peanuts, traditional vegetables, and value addition. 7 farmers are enabled to prepare Bio Dynamic Preparations, Vermicompost, organic fertilizers and pest repellants. Around 15 different crop varieties were tried out by farmers in the group. Traditional paddy of 6 varieties; millets of 5 varieties; oil seeds like peanuts, sesame, castor; Pulses like Toor dal, green gram, black gram, red gram, cow pea, Indian peas; vegetables like brinjal, lady's finger, cluster beans, radish, chillies, carrots red and black, beetroot; greens like methi, coriander, mint, peppermint, spinach, broccoli, ponnankanni, vallarai, karsalankanni; and Fruits like pineapple, water apple, custard apple, banana and papaya were grown and sold too! The diversity ensured that there was no loss due to dropping of price as a result of over production. The farmers who adopted organic methods saw the difference in quality of food and claimed that there was a reduction in production but there was also a reduction in input costs. The input output ratio is of great importance for calculating economic advantage of organic low input methods of cultivation of crops for subsistence farming. For full report follow the link below.



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DfIcWTJw7-iHZermTerKxLSPf3o7yF/view?usp=sharing>

Processing of local produce and marketing locally to bring stability to local economy:

The millet processing unit that we helped set up is now upgraded by the efforts of the beneficiary and is a full-fledged processing unit where paddy, millets are hulled and made available to local consumers at a minimum price while it is sold through the Mudhive platform for a slightly premium price to make ends meet. Two Oil seed extraction units have been setup and peanuts, sesame, coconut are processed. For the coming year we have decided to collect all the neem seeds and pongam seeds that are collected in our region and produce good quality neem oil and pongam oil for making organic pest repellants and preparation of organic soaps. We started a small unit where women make snacks from millets and sell them in the local market and during our workshops. A few women have started making products like health mixes, soup mixes, ready made dosa flour, ready make khichidi mix, Pickles and other preserves. Fresh vegetables and such value added products are all sold in the farmer's market in Dharmapuri and in the village locally. The prices are variable as per the location and the clientele. You can order for products on <https://mudhive.in/products/>



Heart felt gratitude for your continued support and belief in our work.

Puvidham is a registered trust and can accept donations from India and abroad and issue a tax receipt accordingly. puvidham@gmail.com.

If you would like to contribute, please make donations in the name of Puvidham Rural Dev Trust

PUVIDHAM RURAL DEVELOPMENT TRUST	Phone: 09600491176/ 09500964830 / 09600457495
FCRA number: 075870079	80G no: AAATP6338EF20214
Postal address: Puvidham, Nagarkoodal village and post (via) Indur, Dharmapuri , Pin no: 636803. Tamilnadu. India.	