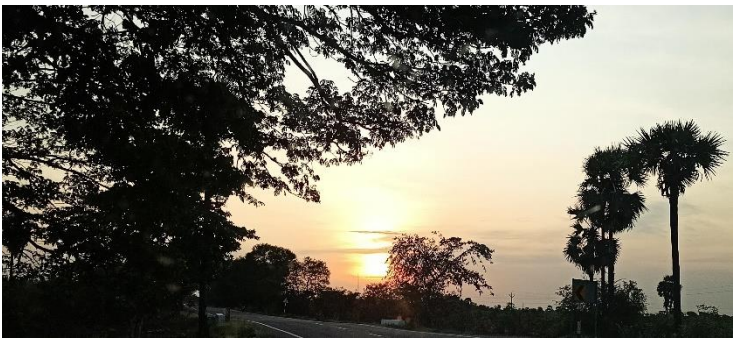


PUVIDHAM
Educating for Sustainability
ANNUAL REPORT 23-24

Puvudham, Nagarkoodal village, Dharmapuri, 636803. Tamilnadu, INDIA.

www.puvudham.in Ph.09600491176 & 9500964830. Email: puvudham@gmail.com

Introduction: Puvudham is a space for self-sustainable living, zero waste lifestyle and education through working with both hands creating resources from waste, growing food and maintaining the campus. 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 behaviour and helping us to understand our responsibilities. We are endeavouring to cultivate a conscience in children and adults alike through empathy, equality of all work, 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?” How can we reverse the climate crisis?



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.

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. 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 have to plan about their children's future not in terms of what job they will have but in terms of what resources we are leaving for them to live a happy life. 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 of children. There is more than enough evidence that children are being impacted by screen time, fear of examination and fear of failure. The fact that humans are part of nature and need to connect with it to be healthy, happy and content is becoming more and more evident. The Puvudham Learning Space is proof that children heal when they are in nature and working with plants and animals.

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.

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She wanted to ensure her children had basic amenities for survival like air, water and food in their purest form. She learnt the skills of regenerative agriculture too! 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 the "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. He is a mechanic by training, and carpentry is his passion. He has now set up a complete wood workshop where he supports children to upcycle waste coconut shells into soap boxes and agarbatti stands and waste wood into furniture and beads!

Nivas M an alumnus of Puvudham who has finished his graduation in Agriculture came to help with the 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. He looks after the permaculture garden of 20 cents which provides all the greens and has 50 different fruit trees which have started bearing fruit this year.

Naveen Kumar is the connection between Puvudham and the surrounding Farmers who want to transition to organic practices. He has worked for the 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 well versed in Bio dynamic preparations and applications. He continues to work with other farmers and extend support of indigenous seeds of grains and vegetables, organic applications and tree saplings.



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 32 children! Krishnadevi takes classes for all children in a vertical grouping system using the curriculum that has evolved in Puvudham over the last 3 decades. She is an electronic engineer and has taken up the role of a facilitator for the "Science for Sustainability" workshop for children.

Urva Chaudhary joined in May as a volunteer and then became an integral part of the team in spite of not being able to communicate in Tamil. She is very interested in growing herbs and creating new recipes for making millets more nutritious and delicious! She takes care of the soap making and herb collection with the children and has created herb teas of medicinal value by mixing and matching the various herbs growing and collected from the land of Puvudham.

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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 medicines to homes! 25 students lived at Puvudham to learn.

An overview:

At Puvudham the importance is on developing the core qualities of a proactive human being. These are developed through understanding the learning process and the basic quality of being human. Happiness is the core principle. Self-discipline and responsible behaviour are inspired through the presence of Gurus or teachers who are willing to learn and have respect for the child and his/her will. Karmayoga is the spiritual path that leads us all to the space of self-respect and self-love while also feeling the same level of love and respect for all the other beings. Fear is understood and overcome, disgust is shed and compassion is nurtured, while ignorance is rooted out by allowing the natural curiosity of the child to blossom through asking questions. The questions are not answered in a rush. The children are facilitated to discover answers on their own. Creativity is nurtured through providing children space to make their ideas into products.



Self-awareness course for adults in Social Emotional Learning: The Learning Facilitators Course LFP is designed to allow the adults to reflect on their actions and emotions and regulate them so that the children in the care of adults are also learning to observe and respond instead of assuming and reacting. After the completion of the course the adults are able to communicate with children in an empathetic way and facilitate their learning at the pace of the child while providing individualized guidance. Some of the adults who have finished the course have started their own learning spaces using the same philosophy and methodology as Puvudham. Some of them have started their own travel schooling programs and community learning centres.

Online support with curriculum for education for sustainability for homeschooling and unschooling families: Three decades of working with children has led to the belief that children learn when they want to. That there is no need to force them to learn. Our curriculum is based on the five elements and delivered through stories and songs with a lot of activities to learn about natural phenomena and sustainable living practices. This is now made available with the help of the learning facilitators who have finished the LFP course. There are three online classes a week and the children and parent or care taker are given a list of activities to do and the way to take it forward at the pace of the child. There is a weekly session for Emotional Intelligence where the children learn to identify and find appropriate ways of expressing their emotions. The facilitators walk the child through the situation and help them identify how they could have dealt with it more effectively. There are 45 children in this program. This is run through our social enterprise MUDHIVE.

School reopened on June 15th. Since Puvudham is now only a fully residential learning space, it was made mandatory for the parents to attend the two-day workshop "Return to the Soil", before the children were given admission to the learning centre. This workshop gives the parents an idea of what the children do at Puvudham and how their happiness contributes to the increase in self-confidence and the feeling of capability and responsible behaviour.

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Workshops, Visitors, and Volunteers:

Return to the soil workshop: 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. There were 12 workshops and a total of 53 families attend the workshop with their children.



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. There is 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 Puvидham and partake in all the activities of

cooking, cleaning and yoga. After dawn they go along with the children who stay at puvидham 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!

Once the parents have seen what life at Puvидham is like we request them to make small changes in their own lives to ensure that the child is in an environment of consistency and solidarity on basic values. The children then attend the 8-day workshop “Science for sustainability” before they decide to join the learning centre and become residential students of the Puvидham Gurukul.



Science for Sustainability– Following the workshop for adults, is the workshop for children. The parents leave their kids at Puvидham 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.

12 workshops were conducted and a total of 125 children attended the workshops and some chose to continue as students at puvидham. 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



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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!

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 any challenge that life brings to them!

Spending time learning spinning, weaving, 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 and discovery not the rote memory of facts!

This year students from Vishwa Vidyapeeth in Bangalore, Jain Gurukul in Bangalore, LVVV in Vijayawada, AP, came for the Science for Sustainability workshop. Their visit enhanced the learning of the children at Puvidham and helped them gain a perspective on themselves and their capabilities. Around 120 students from Various colleges supported by AGARAM Foundation came for exposure visits!

A three-day workshop was conducted for 65, 2nd year students of Architecture from Pondichery. 80 Students came from Don Bosco MSW college for a one-day exposure to understand what change is and how it always begins with each one making small changes in their patterns of consumption, understanding and building empathy with the natural world. The students learn about the principles of self-reliant living and sustainable living.

Home and Beyond: is the 8-day workshop for sharing the experiments with mud construction and Permaculture gardening. This is for families who are exploring sustainable living pathways to experience a minimalistic life in nature's lap before taking the leap to transition from the life in the city to a rural hinterland to look for purpose and peace in life.



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During this workshop we take the participants for a village study visit to understand how localization functioned and how people relied on each other and local resources till a few decades back. Last year we had 4 workshops on a quarterly basis and around 35 families attended the workshop. Many of them have been inspired to homeschool their children and transition to an eco-friendlier life style.

Every month we have at least 2 Volunteers living at Puvudham hostel. They have to share the space with the children. This causes a lot of inconvenience for both parties. There is an urgent need for a workshop space because as of now the children are sharing their living space with the workshop participants. Below is our proposal with a request for funds. Do read and contribute whatever is possible! Drops of water make an ocean!

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EeJBHq3l3GRFKDR9FFX8t8t7lwS_2iY_/edit?usp=sharing&oid=109323803815454942639&rtpof=true&sd=true

Visits to other learning spaces:



Foot Hills School is a Montessori training school at Salem, for parents wanting to home school their children. A carnival was conducted in November at the school.

It was a great opportunity for Puvudham to display our Herbal products, Soaps, Toys, Wooden art, and many more. Our children took part in cultural activities too. It was a great experience for Puvudham to share skills with other people and realize that we have a lot to learn from visiting such initiatives.

Exhibition at Yoga Mandi

Yogamandir is a Yoga practice ashram at Selaiyur, Tambaram near Chennai. Mr. Devarajan Iya, the founder of Yoga Mandir conducts an exhibition every year during Navratri, Puvudham children have been participating in this exhibition and explained the philosophy 'Man made God or God made Man' using posters. This activity had been disrupted because of Corona for the past 3 years. It was revived this year, and we got a chance of two days to put up the event. All of us at Puvudham



subscribe to the belief that Mother Nature is the only visible God that gives us everything and that it is our duty to care for her and use her gifts with respect and frugality. Almost 500 people visited the event and all the children's presentations were very well received. //"[b

Puvudham proposed that the Creation of GOD by man has indeed been forgotten and that is the cause for division and intolerance of humans. Mr. Devarajan was very pleased and as a mark of appreciation he organised a visit to Mahabalipuram for half day and

provided food, travel and gifts to the children.

Nishtai Ashram Visit: Nishtai Ashram run by Mr. Baskar more popularly known as Healer Baskar has been very inspired by the philosophy and methods of Puvudham and has been spreading

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awareness about Puvидham in all the relevant places. This led to a great number of people requesting to visit Puvидham which culminated in the formulation and running of the Return to the Soil workshops which has become a regular event at Puvидham.

During this quarter, Nishtai had its Annual Meet at Pollachi. Mr. Madhavaraj attended the meeting during which Mr. Baskar introduced Puvидham as a healing centre for the children who are having trouble in the normal academic system and for children with various challenges.



The Art and Craft Centre: The craft centre is one of the main attractions for children.

Spinning, weaving, upcycling of old clothes into bags, sanitary pads, and foot mats is an activity that brings lot of joy to the children as they can sell their products and feel the pride of being a creator!

The carpentry unit is also very popular. Children make soap boxes, bird feeders, agarbatti stands, lamp shades and a lot of other small furniture that the school needs.

Herb based hygiene and health products making unit provides children with the opportunity to connect with nature on a daily basis and learn about the uses of plants. The soap making unit and the herb collection unit are another favourite.

The vegetable garden is where children learn about areas, weights, plants and herbs. They sow and they harvest vegetables of around 15 varieties. They begin to eat vegetables they avoided before when they harvest it from their own plot in the garden.

The Science lab is the interactive space for children to immerse in the syllabus prescribed in the textbooks. It is a lab where material for all the experiments is provided and the children carry out the experiments under the supervision of an adult.



The maker's space is the workshop where all the machines to cut, weld, bolt and polish are kept. Children can decide to design a new tool or repair the bicycle, or make a mini wind mill to generate electricity.

Puvидham Farm: Farming is becoming more and more difficult because of monkeys, peacocks, and wild boars apart from parakeets and small birds that eat the grain. It is almost as if they all know that our farm is free of chemicals and they flock to it for a good meal. So, there is an attempt at learning to grow things that are not enjoyed by these creatures. Castor, greens, okra, radish are some of them. Every week we go to the Dharmapuri Farmer's market to sell our hand made products, vegetables, dried herbs and other health mixes. We have trained three local women to make snacks and hygiene products that they sell in the market.

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We organized a Localization Festival in December. We provided stalls for producers of organic products, seed and traditional food. The festival was at Puvudham to also invite our local farmers to sell their organic produce. The festival was a great success and we need to do more such events to increase the awareness about localization, food as medicine, and traditional seeds and foods. Rekha, a parent whose children studied at puvudham for 2 years in 2016-18 is an expert in traditional food. She

and her team of cooks made delicious traditional preparations and spoke about the health benefits of eating locally grown traditional grains and vegetables.

Meenakshi did teacher education workshops for various colleges and schools. She also attended the conference on Creativity in education in March, organised in New Delhi by UNESCO and became part of the Indian creativity consortium. She has mentored groups of enterprising youth to find funding from *Chinmaya Mission* for their small ventures and provided valuable guidance. Yuvaraj was one of the farmers that was supported for 2 years. He now has joined hands with Vijay and a few others to start a seed bank of local varieties of seeds. Monishant and Suresh were already working with farmers and running a farmer's market in Palladam. Now they have been supported to have a flourishing farmer's market run twice a week. Vinit was interested in creating bio inputs so he got financial support for setting up a lab and is providing support for no branding and recycled packaging so that the basic value systems are not compromised. Nivas is an alumnus of Puvudham and he has his own organic farm of 15 cents where he grows a variety of exotic fruits organically. He needed support to set up a bore well to water his orchard. She extended support in the form of interest free loan and he is repaying the loan slowly.

The hamlet where Puvudham lies is a colony of marginalised landless labourers. They have been working on the land at Puvudham since the last 20 years. This year many of them wanted loans to build their houses. Meenakshi told them that if they construct their houses with mud, she would find money to provide them with interest free loans. One family agreed. Once their house was completed people saw the cost benefit, the climatic comfort and the elegance of the house and now there is a line of people who want to build their house with mud. Meenakshi is sourcing the funds for this from family and friends and hoping to create a core fund from where any of the members can take an interest free loan for their housing needs.

The way forward: The intention is to keep the number of children limited to a maximum of 50 and to continue the workshops to increase the impact of the ideas on simple living and regenerative practices. There is a need to build a Dormitory space for the participants to stay during the workshop. Our product list is growing and we have been able to support around 20 farmers to grow their own food organically and sell their organic products online too! Please order at mudhive.in

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