

**PUVIDHAM Annual Report 2024-2025**

In 2000, when the learning centre was started by Meenakshi to homeschool her own children, she wanted to understand how children learn. She had found her own schooling very limiting and irrelevant, and had left the city of Mumbai to find purpose in life. She decided that the least she could do is to provide herself with clean air, pure water and non-toxic food! So, she decided to buy the completely degraded land in Dharmapuri where Puvudham is today. From 1992 to 2000 she worked the land, learning to conserve soil and water, collecting seeds of indigenous trees and herbs, cultivating them in a nursery and planting them on the land to nurture biodiversity. Her children began to learn directly from nature through all the farm work that was needed for living. As she observed them grow, she decided not to send them to school and wanted to understand how children learn before deciding what, how, where and when to teach. Her journey of observing and understanding her own and other children who eventually began to come to her home has established a conviction that teaching is not conducive to learning. Learning she has come to believe is an instinct more primary than hunger. Therefore, teaching is more of a hindrance especially when what is to be taught is decided by the adults and the system.

The Challenge: Real learning is child-led, and the role of the adult in such an environment is of a facilitator who walks and wonders with the child. Following her intuition, Meenakshi began to learn all over again with her children. She felt that the only things she could teach her children were her fears, her limitations and her biases. She knew that she had learnt more about life in the time she had spent working on the land for the last 8 years than in her 30 odd years of being on the planet. And it had been the most valuable learning because it was connected with survival! She saw that her children were learning this survival skill as a part of living by doing the daily chores and observing nature. This made her sure that teaching was an interference to the natural learning process and the intelligence of each and every child.

Our Curriculum: Thus evolved a curriculum where education was the process of getting to know the self, understand one's role in the social ecosystem and become proactive in addressing the issues staring at us, and caring for the environment. The curriculum strives to integrate learning through the 5 elements (Sun, Water, Earth, Air, Space) observed by using the 5 senses (Sight, Taste, Touch, Smell, Hearing) and personalized through the 5 emotions (Fear, Anger, Disgust, Dejection, Jealousy), providing a holistic worldview! Creative work plays a crucial role in helping the child to experience the elements and their emotions through the use of their senses! All work is Creative! The simple chores of everyday life enhance our creative thinking.



*Survival is not of the physically fittest but of those that learn to adapt and change.
The fig learns to live and grow on the palm!*

To live a good life is all that every child needs to know and that is learnt by living a meaningful life with full agency over their lives. Children by nature are resilient till they have been taught to be fearful and thoughtless. Resilience and adaptability are the key to a good life!

Like Carl Rogers has said in his Humanistic Theory

An educated person is the one “who has learned how to learn . . . how to adapt and change” and realizes “that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security”.

This is the core of the philosophy at Puvudham. Each child is born to learn and has a unique way of learning on its own. The adults in the environment need to trust the children to do the best for themselves and allow each child to learn at their own pace, things that appeal to their inner guidance while being an inspiration to the child by being open to learning all the time and creating and holding a non-judgmental space. This is one of the reasons that the ritual of evaluation is completely avoided and continuous and comprehensive self-evaluation is collectively facilitated for each adult and child through positive criticism in sharing circles.

Facilitation of Learning for Parents: Now at Puvudham we have come to the conclusion that it is the parents who need to understand what the process of learning is. They need to be supported so that they are not carried away by the advertisements of exclusive schooling. They need to realize that they are the role models for their children. That the child spends a maximum of 6 hours at school and the rest of the time is at home with them and they need to use that time to nurture them and understand their challenges.

Schools very easily diagnose their children with learning difficulties and the whole family goes through emotional, physical and financial stress. To educate parents and other adults who work with children is where Puvudham has now decided to focus. The idea of self-reliance and interdependence as the way to heal ourselves, society and the environment is discussed. We try to tell parents to learn to create and use products so that their dependence on the market is minimal. We entreat them to become conscious consumers and primary producers because that is what will give them agency over their own lives and inspire their children to become creative human beings. To enable this, the following workshops are held every month for parents and adults aspiring to be facilitators for enabling learning for children.

Return to the Soil Workshop: A Two-Day Journey



Living, learning and working together

The **Return to the Soil** workshop, held monthly, introduces parents to an alternative educational philosophy and encourages self-reflection over pressuring children. The experience begins on a Friday evening at 5 pm, where participants learn about composting toilets and their benefits in converting waste into fertilizer.

A simple dinner of ragi balls and greens chutney, prepared collaboratively, sets the tone for the evening before mats are rolled out at 8:30 pm for rest.

Saturday starts early at 4:30 am with breakfast and gardening activities like weeding, sowing, or harvesting. At 9:30 am, the group gathers to hear the inspiring transformation story of Puvudham from wasteland to forest. Questions about education and parenting are addressed, fostering a sense of

community. Post-lunch, participants enjoy craft sessions, upcycling old clothes, coconut shells, and paper. Evening activities include playing with children and preparing dinner together, ending the day by 8:30 pm. Sunday begins with a forest walk, exploring water harvesting, soil conservation, and observing nature. Participants learn about healing herbs, soap-making, and sustainable cleaning practices. The workshop concludes with a session on "food as medicine" and auto urine therapy. By noon, participants leave with fresh perspectives, ready to embrace more mindful living.

Science of Sustainability: We host a week-long **Science and Sustainability** workshop every month for



Learning to create and repair electronic and electrical items

families who want to adapt to live in nature before they move to their farms. The workshop aims to explore sustainable living through hands-on activities, helping participants connect science with practical, eco-friendly practices.

Key sessions include **cloth upcycling**, where participants turn old garments into bags and accessories, and **clay work**, which introduces crafting with natural, biodegradable materials. In the **paper-**

making activity, participants recycle waste paper into handmade sheets, learning the importance of reducing paper waste. Families also cook on **woodfire stoves**, understanding energy efficiency and mindful cooking.

In the **gardening** session, participants work in the kitchen garden and create a nursery for tomato and chilly seedlings, compost organic waste, and learn soil health basics. The **water management** session covers techniques like rainwater harvesting and greywater reuse, emphasizing sustainable water use.

Participants share positive feedback, appreciating the practical learning and community experience. One attendee noted, *"This workshop has transformed how I think about sustainability."*

By combining science with actionable steps, the workshop empowers families to adopt sustainable practices and inspires them to make lasting changes in their lives.



At home with minimum comfort and learning self-reliance

Home and Beyond: The "Home and Beyond" workshop, is an eight-day workshop, held every three



Learning about herbs and wild foods

months, and serves as a platform to explore and share knowledge on sustainable and holistic living. This workshop covers a range of topics including mud construction, permaculture farming, spinning and weaving, simple living, and the principles of food as medicine. Participants also learn about the healing properties of herbs and how to incorporate them into daily life for better health.

A key takeaway from the workshop is the importance of understanding and embracing an organic way of life before embarking on the journey of building a mud house. The process of constructing a sustainable home is deeply interconnected with a lifestyle that values harmony with nature. By learning to farm sustainably, grow food organically, and adopt traditional practices like spinning and weaving,

individuals can cultivate a deeper connection with the environment and a more mindful approach to living.

This immersive experience encourages participants to see beyond the walls of their future homes, fostering a lifestyle rooted in simplicity, self-sufficiency, and respect for nature. "Home and Beyond" is not just about constructing houses but about building a foundation for a fulfilling, organic, and sustainable way of life.



On-Demand Workshops Conducted: Apart from these regular workshops we also do workshops on demand by different organisations.

Abeer Chakraborty, chairman of Ahead Initiatives- Kolkata contacted us in August for a 6-day workshop for their education initiative working in villages around Kolkata. The team arrived and we shared our philosophy and the pedagogy that has evolved over time for first generation literates. Later in October Meenakshi was invited to participate in a conference hosted by Ahead Initiatives on alternative education.

<https://www.aheadinitiatives.in/>

Majhihira Ashram school is a Nai Talim school that was started by Chitta Bhushan Dasgupta in 1942 at Mahatma Gandhi's behest. It is now under the care of Manik Dasgupta. Meenakshi visited the school in May. It has over 500 students and a teacher training Institute. She decided to spend time to dialogue with the teachers to see if they were inclined to revive the Nai Talim values in the campus. In October she did a 4-day workshop on the core values of sustainability as visualized by Gandhi. A resource mapping of the region was done and all the adults showed immense knowledge about the local herbs and material. Subsequently, in January, there was another session in which the teachers were inspired to allow participation of the children in planning and speaking in English to enhance their spoken language skills. There is a need for quarterly interaction to keep the goals and action aligned with the Nai Talim principles.



Learning to upcycle old clothes into mats



Presenting our journey at the conference

Meenakshi is a board member of Nai Talim Sameeti and took part in the conference on 15th and 16th of February. There were Gandhian stalwarts like Radha didi, who have had to let go of the basic philosophy of Nai Talim in the face of modern competitive mindset. There was an effort to understand the challenges and revive the basic values in Nai Talim schools. There was a discussion on reaching out to other schools and teachers and training them in the work-based education pedagogy of Nai Talim. The realisation that Gandhiji had

understood the social implications of mere academic education left us all wondering at the foresight of the Mahatma! But we were all faced with the dilemma of how to proceed so that the essence of sustainability enmeshed with the Nai Talim philosophy was accessible to all children.

We did in-house training and exposure for teachers from Kuvempu trust in Sivaganga, Chitradurga district of Karnataka. On March, 6 teachers and their director Dr. Geetha spent 5 days understanding the need for the teachers to focus on self-improvement rather than focusing on teaching the children what is in the text books.

They learnt how math can be learnt easily by children if we focus on the decimal system of numbers and allow them to build numbers using simple tools like place value cards. The importance of following the child and allowing them to discover while supporting them to do experiments and build knowledge was discussed. They were convinced that spoken English would go a longer way in improving the confidence of the teachers as well as the children. So, an effort was made to improve the overall team's ability to write a daily journal and use google translate to express what they want to write in English. They were asked to write command sentences that they commonly use in their open learning space so that they could use them in the presence of the children thereby exposing the children to English as a conversational language.



Five people from CESC, an organization based near Madurai came in July to understand the nuances of working with rural children for their education in terms of life skill development and nurturing critical thinking. Ekta Parishad, the social wing of CESC, works in many villages to improve the learning of children with a view to make them self-reliant and self-motivated learners. <https://www.cescindia.in/>

Eight people from Srujanavani from Visakhapatnam <http://srujanavani.org/> came for a week-long immersion in October. They have been working with children for a long time and were looking to make learning stress-free and enjoyable, both for the adult and the child.



Agaram Foundation brought 70 students for a two-day immersion on December 29th and 30th. The students planted herbs in the wild and worked with their hands to create coconut shell key chains and cloth upcycled coasters, and discussed the purpose of life with Meenakshi in batches of 20 members.

The Learning Centre: Puvudham learning space is now an Open Learning Centre. We provide homeschooling support for children from the age of 3 to 14. At the age of 14 the child appears for 8th equivalent exam in the NIOS and thereafter can decide to join either a government school or a private school for their 9th level or continue in NIOS for their 10th and stay at Puvudham to learn any of the various life trades that are available for exploration.

In the academic session of 2024-25 we had 25 children between the ages of 6 and 16 who stayed for short spells at Puvudham with their guardian and went back with assignments to do at home. The children spent time at Puvudham learning spinning, weaving, carpentry, upcycling of cloth, cooking, animal care, pottery and origami. They were also engaged with our curriculum for sustainable living – PENCIL (Puvudham Environment and Nature Centric Intuitive Learning) and learnt about concepts appropriate to their age and integrated with life.

Events, Tours and performances: In November we took the older age group between 10 and 16 on a 40-day-long tour to explore the cultural diversity of our country and learn about themselves and each other. In August Zemyna Foundation from Bangalore <https://zemynafoundation.org/>



sponsored Berty and Yathish from Mysore who are independent artists and playwrights to help create a performance with the children. All the parents and the team from Zemyna came to Puvudham and the performance was staged on 15th August.

The play was called “Freedom from Waste”. As on 15th August we celebrate our freedom from British Rule, the children felt that it was time to focus on other kinds of freedom, and waste

accumulation due to tourism was their main concern. The children along with Kaya, an alumnus of Puvudham, travelled to the northwest and visited many alternative spaces, performing this play everywhere!

The first performance was in Panchagani at the MRA Centre, for the Initiatives of Change <https://in.iofc.org/en> during their workshop ‘Education Today Society Tomorrow’ on 6th of November. The participants at the workshop were very engaged and had a lot of appreciation for the children’s perspective on tourism as an industry that is adding to waste.



The children travelled by train from Dharmapuri to Pune. From there they were picked up by the team from IOFC and taken to their MRA centre at Panchagani. They then went to Vigyan Ashram at Pabal. <https://iiepune.org/vigyan-ashram-pabal/> They learnt how soldier flies are used in composting and how they are bred. They did screen-printing and food testing.

They visited Madhav Sahasrabudhe and Nilima tai our mentors for spinning and origami who live in Pune, and spent time learning the nuances of spinning.



They spent four days in Bharat Mansataji’s farm “Vanvadi” at Karjat near Mumbai. Kaya, who is an architect specialising in sustainable construction, did an earth construction workshop there while helping build a cottage. There were many participants from different parts of the country, and the children had the opportunity to perform the play once more! <https://vanvadi.in/about-vanvadi/> They also visited

Chinchwadi Adivasi village in Karjat, adopted by Dilip Jain through DJed Foundation in Maharashtra.

From there they went to Karigarshala in Bhuj. <https://thekarigarshala.com/> They were charmed by the beautiful humble structures and learnt to make wooden toys and gifts. They visited 'Road to Heaven' in Kutch and experienced the beautiful white desert and camel rides in Kalo Dungar!



From there they went to Shanti math in Mount Abu. The visit to Jawaibandh tiger sanctuary was bypassed because one of the children was very unwell. They continued on to Swaraj University in Udaipur and saw their learning

centre Shikshantar to get an idea about the Creativity Addas and Livelihoods that are being nurtured there. <https://www.shikshantar.org/> . <https://www.swarajuniversity.org/>

At the Aadarshila learning centre near Indore, Amit and Jayashree took them to the banks of Narmada River to learn about the dam and its environmental destruction. Then they went to Living Vikas Vidya Vanam in Vijayawada and returned home after 40 days! The exposure to Hindi has inspired many to learn the language.

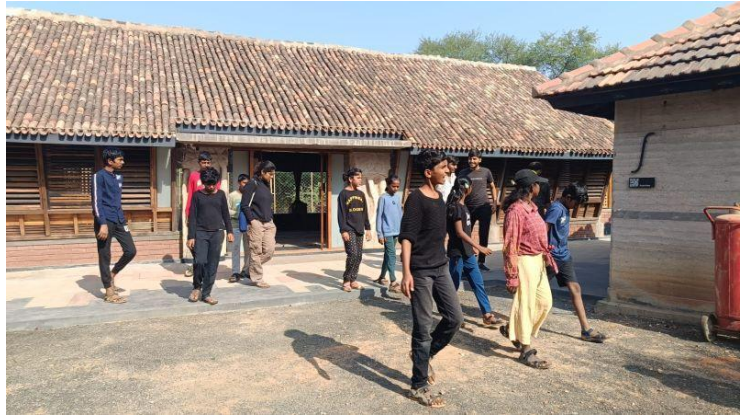
Visitors, Volunteers and Interns: We usually have two volunteers every month spending 10 days to a month to learn organic farming or understand the education philosophy and pedagogy. Interns from TISS come to stay with regularly to understand our perspective on development and understand sustainable development, permaculture food forest in this arid region, mud construction, and minimalism as a way of life!

The organic farming consultant Pamayan - who learnt from the organic farming icon Nammalvar - visited Puvudham and shared his ideas. He invited Meenakshi to Podhigaisolai for a 3-day conference on sustainable living and honoured her. <https://pothigaisolai.com/En/pamayam.html>

Honours and awards: Bhavan Institute in Salem honoured Meenakshi and she shared her concerns about the competition and consumerism in schools. She commented on the unnecessary farce of convocation for preschoolers and primary school kids.

Meenakshi was given the We Wonder Woman award on September 6, 2024

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_E2Ely5KV/?igsh=MWkyNmhmmbXV6bjM3ZQ==



Shifting Focus to Livelihood needs in our village: We have been living in this village since 1992. We have seen it develop into a dependent community from being an independent community. There are more concrete houses now but the families are not living in them. They are busy working in the city to be able to repay their dues for all the material development they have achieved. The pristine landscape is now dotted with garbage! There is more drinking and fighting. The farm lands are not cared for and the common lands are getting eroded. To recreate a community of self-reliance built on the fundamental understanding of our local resources is the only way to save the village.

Providing quality education is not enough for the sustainability of a village. What is needed is a perspective of how the resources are being exploited and will soon become scarce. Education of the youth must involve an understanding of regenerative practices and foster pride in their village. This can be done by providing livelihood options which are regenerative and non-polluting. We had been interacting with various craft communities to understand the dynamics of modern living through surveys as a part of the learning for children. After 2020 we decided to focus on livelihood creation within our village panchayat and working with youth.

1. In 2010 we conducted a **survey** of the traditional crafts in Dharmapuri. We found weavers, potters, bamboo basket weavers and many farmers who were interested in alternatives to chemical farming.
2. In 2016 the potters of Nalaparampatti village reached out to us for help. The laws prevented them from procuring clay from the village lake. We helped them to write an RTI and to submit a petition at the Collectorate and **facilitated the passing of a GO** to allow potters all over TN to be able to take clay from local water bodies. We helped them get an identity card from the Handicraft department, which comes under the Ministry of Textiles, so that they would not be harassed by the local police when they transported clay.
3. Through **NABARD**, we have been working with local farmers since 2020 to help them transition to organic farming using Biodynamic principles and preparations. We have conducted training sessions, **and over the last two years, 20 acres of land has been converted to using only organic inputs.**
4. We are working with local youth, forming **a group of 20 young people who are practising organic gardening on one cent of land as a trial.** We provide them with training, organic seeds, and bio inputs to support their efforts while they gather observations and data on the results of various inputs. The goal is to create a resource base to **demonstrate that organic farming is viable and can provide food and an income of at least 25,000 rupees per acre per month if we follow principles of soil building and biodiversity.**
5. We have found that the major bottleneck in the transition to organic farming is the availability of bio inputs. In emergencies, farmers want off-the-shelf solutions! So, we have supported **a group of youngsters (three men and one woman) in starting a laboratory where they prepare bio inputs for the entire group.**
6. We are part of the organic farmers market in Dharmapuri, where farmers regularly sell their produce at the same price as non-organic produce but still make a profit, as we have eliminated the middleman and the farmers can name their own price for their produce.
7. We are working with **two groups of two women each, to upcycle** old clothes into bags, foot mats, and other products, which are also sold at the farmer's market. In this market, plastic packaging is not allowed, so cloth and paper bags are used to package the products
8. **Two women have been trained in soap making** and now produce bathing soaps, clothes washing soaps, and vessel washing soaps, which they sell at the farmer's market.
9. **One group of women makes snacks from millets** and sells them in the market. These women are also beginning to process everyday household items by purchasing them at wholesale prices and selling them to their village neighbours for a nominal profit, all without plastic packaging.
10. We have just **set up a carpentry workshop**, employing one of our old students and another youth from his hamlet, **where we are making toys from waste wood and coconut shells** collected within the village, ensuring we do not cut down any trees—only using branches.

Next phase of work:

The present education system and the work culture of today are creating the false impression that we can all do virtual work, as a cog in the larger machine, and earn our 'living'. Whereas the truth is that the real resources are created by the masses who are just becoming literate. **The growing ill-health and psychological issues among youth are outcomes of such misperceptions. All youth from the village are dreaming of a white-collar job and, when they do not manage to find such a job, they end up with self-destructive habits like drinking and tobacco usage.** Working with their hands to create products will not only enhance the self-esteem of young people but also provide them with enough income.

As a first step towards creating an ecosystem, focused on empowering and creating value for the youth, by the youth, we hope to work with a few young people who have been students in our school. The second and third generation literates now understand and are deciding to honour their physical labour and the processes involved.

We want to enable them to return to the villages and together try to create a community that manages its resources with wisdom. The areas of focus of our first phase of work would be:

1. Growing organic food tied with Soil & Water Conservation, Soil Regeneration, Creating Food Forests, Seed Saving and Composting - to first provide for themselves and their community, rooted in the recognition that **health is wealth.**
2. Building houses with local materials, regenerating forests and other local resources for building and reviving the traditional skills and research to create new materials from agriculture waste, knowing that the **right to housing is a fundamental right.**
3. Metal work to make human-scale tools for farming, weeding, seeding, harvesting, weaving and spinning, in the awareness that **self-reliance is real freedom.**
4. Pottery with local clay, tied with sustainable and biodegradable alternative materials, Carpentry, woodwork, paper-making, upcycling of old clothes to avoid use of plastics, and safe disposal of plastics. **Garbage is the root of disease.**
5. Humane Technology and environmentally conscious choices for a better future for our children – **A creative expression which acts as an instrument for awareness and change.**

Campus Resource Centre for Crafts: Towards this end we have made the Puvudham campus a resource centre for these crafts. Our team is proficient in these basic crafts. We have been doing organic farming for the last 30 years and supporting our team with around 30 percent of their food needs. A talented and skilled team of engineers and architects does construction with mud as the primary material, while using other local materials as well. There is have a full-fledged maker's space and two technicians who make farm tools. In the carpentry unit, we make toys, furniture and even do roof work with local wood! We work with potters and weavers and train the workshop participants in these skills. Many young people come to make films and videos on sustainability on our campus. We feel honoured to have inspired many young people to walk away from material success and look for meaning in their lives!

You may partner with us in this journey and contribute old clothes or donate on our website!

You are welcome to visit our campus any time and share our simple life and organic products!

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