

## Site Visit Report – The Forest Way, Thiruvannamalai

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I first learnt about The Forest Way during a Turtle Walk with Arun, Founder & Trustee in Chennai few years ago. Thanks to that chance encounter, I became a regular visitor to Marudam Campus whenever I visited Tiruvannamalai. I have participated in few of school and conservation activities during such visits.

- 1) Activities mentioned here pertains to my stay in Thiru in the week of 25<sup>th</sup> Aug 2025
- 2) Interaction with folks at The Forest Way – Trustees, Staff, Teachers and Students of Marudam Farm School
- 3) Hill Walk, Visit to Nursery & Thamarai Kulam Promenade
- 4) Observation of Activities in above mentioned places, Community Activities, and other Initiatives
- 5) Pictures don't correspond to the site visit period

### **The Forest Way**

The Forest Way operates as a collective that has grown organically around environmental restoration and alternative education, with work flowing through four interconnected streams.

At the centre lies their commitment to restoring nature—the ongoing afforestation of Arunachala and surrounding areas, the vibrant Park Nursery where indigenous saplings are carefully tended, and collaborative efforts with partners like ERA, SSTCN, and Gurukula Botanical Park to widen their canvas of activities.



Their approach to sustainability goes beyond theory into lived practice. Walk through their spaces and you see how nature, sustainability, and aesthetics blend naturally—from the thoughtfully designed school campus to living



quarters and community areas like parks and promenades that demonstrate their philosophy in action. Education takes shape through Marudam Farm School, where children learn in an environment that places nature and individual sensitivity at the heart of the process. Here, personal interests guide learning rather than rigid curricula, creating space for each child's natural curiosity to flourish.

Their work focuses on building deeper human-nature relationships by creating awareness that spreads beyond their immediate community. They welcome anyone to join through hill walks, nature talks, volunteering opportunities, and collaborative projects that draw in people from all backgrounds.

### Programs, Initiatives & Activities



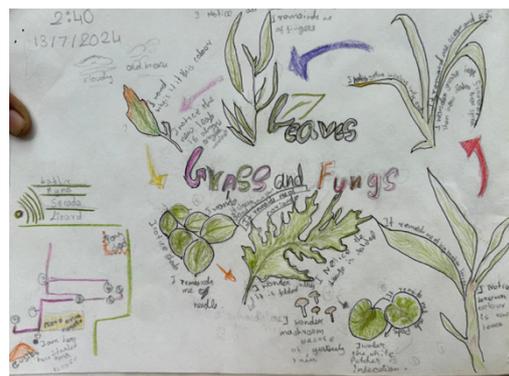
#### Marudam Farm School:

A fertile learning ground for 100+ students, many of whom are first generation learners and 75% of them are under privileged section of the society. The happy chatter of students blends harmoniously with calls of myriad of bird species to welcome any early visitor to the school. The green cover of this 12 acre campus serves as a lung for the neighbourhood contrasting to the otherwise barren surroundings on one side and bustling Bangalore highway on the other. The campus as the name suggests is a functioning farm with acres of land under cultivation, over a dozen cattle, poultry, canine & feline friends and a pony to top it all.

#### Day in the school(Tuesday):

The morning starts with singing assembly at the amphitheatre enclosed between multiple open class rooms, shaded by Sandpaper Tree, Bougainvilla and Manoranjitham. Entire school and visitors assemble and each of senior, middle, junior and kindergarten group get their turn to select a song from the school song book. Harish leads the way in maintaining the musical harmony, particularly with newer songs. The diversity of song collection in the book in itself is an example of inclusivity which the school propounds.

As the day began, I followed ‘Sunbirds’ a junior class with the teacher Uma to ‘the gazebo’ on the other side of the well, which is a large thatched hut with a bench like parapet and broken tiles mosaic. Children get comfortable by sitting, sprawling, stretching or climbing all over Gazebo as



Uma starts her class on elementary botany. They were studying leaves, their structures and naming conventions. Surrounded by many dozen species of trees, children had quite a lot of different leaves to choose, examine, discuss and draw.



On the other side of the well, senior students were busy with their cowshed duty. The task required students to clear-up the cow dung from the shed, in my estimation about 50-60 Kgs of it. The dung needed to be mixed with water to a smoothie like consistency and fed into a biodigester, which has ballooned up with biogas from previous days filling. Students, Teachers (Arun, Akila, Shabnam et al) we involved in

feeding the smoothie on one side, jumping on the ballooned belly of the biogas unit like a trampoline and clearing out the slush from the other side.

The biogas from unit is directly connected to kitchen which has now started humming with activity. The kitchen also features a smokefree woodstove which dishes out flavourful food with the unmissable smoky aroma. Staffed by Akkas from neighbourhood, the lights-on at kitchen is at 6 am to serve students, staff, workers, visitors with kanji, two kinds of meals, tea and afternoon snacks for the school. The place is filled with lively chatter and laughter of Akkas bringing stories from their homes, till Tilo walks in. Bengali accented keera kootu and samai is communicated as today's school lunch and labour is divided between cutting vegetables (many of which from the campus farm), cooking and cleaning.



A walk around the campus, I met The Forest Way staff, all of them are multi-taskers skilled in gardening, farming, building, taking care of dairy etc. So are the kitchen Akkas, when not in kitchen are mending the vegetable and fruit farms.

On the way to lower campus, is the Kindergarten, looks and feels like a 'Hobbit Den' buzzing with activity. Youngest of the school were being lined for their daily snack time walk. Appeals of super patient Leela were going unheeded, while Maha and Kodi was busy organising guavas for snack which was the day's harvest from the farm.



In my tour of lower campus, upper campus and new land, I witnessed land getting prepared for next round sowing, was amazed looking at the banyan tree adjacent to kindergarten & inviting vegetable fruit patches, mounds of reclaimed wood in the carpentry unit, interesting shapes of sustainable spaces in the making, pit loos(toilets) and the hundreds of indigenous trees coming up on the new land. What is interesting is to see students in all of these playing, observing or part taking.

Mid-day, school lunch is brought to dining hall, where students take turn to clean and serve food. The wholesome meal is balanced and nutritious. Care is taken to make sure that nothing is wasted, particularly younger ones are encouraged to eat all that is served on their plate. The lunch time is not a chore, but vibrant with interesting conversation in mixed groups of students, teachers, visitors etc. The conversation that caught my attention was between Pari, Aashima and a group of students about their weekly hill walk scheduled for Thursday, excitement centred around the bloom of Adaali , fruiting of Kaarai and Kadukaai on the hill, eventually quizzing each other about scientific names.



Media room on top of music room was my next destination, a large room with no furniture. Mixed group of students were sitting in groups by themselves largely senior school, some of whom were engrossed in their books. Akila was in one corners sitting with some students teaching business studies. Another group was discussing about the unfinished movie of last week. Every Thursday at 2.30 pm, media room turns into movie hall. A movie is chosen to be watched over two weeks. The movie chosen to be



completed this week is 'Life is Beautiful'. The impromptu discussion pondered upon various aspect of the movie. The open classroom was also place for siesta for Butterfly and Jacky, pets from common house in the lower campus. They went about their business undisturbed by any of these activities.

School library is well stocked and also another room where students spend time for projects or self-study. Kamal who is librarian, among other things for the school, was passionate about the Tamil books and was talking proudly about collection of books by contemporary Tamil writers.

Post snack time, as students were tuning their ears, the familiar honk of the school bus blared and most were ready leave.

Some stayed back for after-school activity – Frisbee which is now a bit hit among students, badminton and a plunge into the large well.



This day's rhythm reveals how the school cultivates far more than textbook knowledge—it nurtures a deep sensitivity that flows naturally from living intimately with the land and community. Students don't just learn about sustainability; they breathe it in the smoky aroma from the wood stove, feel it in the biogas balloon beneath their feet, taste it in vegetables they've watched grow from seed to plate. The mixed-age conversations at lunch, the pets sprawled across classroom floors, the plunge into the well after studies—each moment weaves together academic learning with something deeper. Here, sensitivity to nature isn't taught but absorbed through daily rhythms of tending cows, clearing dung, preparing soil. Humanity isn't a subject but a lived experience in the laughter of kitchen Akkas, the patient teaching in gazebo corners, the collective movie discussions. The Forest Way staff's multitasking—gardening one moment, building the next—mirrors how students too learn that knowledge isn't compartmentalized but interconnected, like the campus itself where learning spaces flow seamlessly from amphitheatre to cowshed to kitchen to well.

## Nari Kurava and Irula Community Outreach

Chat with Poornima who is also a member of the Children Welfare Committee of Thiruvannamalai, gave an overview of this culturally rooted, inclusive outreach program aimed at enhancement of literacy, nutritional, nature education and sports activities of the community.



Three years into the program several markers like enrolment, dropout, community involvement are showing positive trends. Kaifila and Pachaiyappan are now extending this program to include foundational English and Tamil literacy for school going children, drop-outs and elders. With an eye on future, Kaifila is anchoring a discussion with children of the community to understand barriers specific to education among marginalised. Poornima is personally pleased with growing collaboration with government schools, working directly in the space where the burden of discrimination of marginalised is intense.

## Afforestation at Arunachala





The basecamp from where The Forest Way organises afforestation efforts across Arunachala and other sites is The Nursery, an idyllic place on government land adjoining a Children's Park at the base of sacred Arunachala hill. All the activities like pitting, planting, protecting, watering, seed collection, germination, tending to saplings etc. is planned and coordinated at the Nursery.

Jaya, Vijaya, Masilamani, Kumar, Nambi and many play vital roles these activities. Jaya is the custodian of the Nursery. The Afforestation activity requires approximately 30000 saplings of close to 200 species of trees and 500 plant species annually.

Almost all of these are indigenous varieties endemic to the region. All the Akka's from neighbourhood work at the Nursery, enliven the place with their animated conversations as they go about filling the black seedling bags with life giving manure and soil. As one walks through meticulously organised saplings, Jaya explains each of species with drawing attention to the ones that are



critically endangered like Malai Poovarasana, only a few thousands are left in the wild. The Nursery also has its version NICU, a section where some of the seeds and saplings that require extra care are nurtured. The Forest Way Nursery is now an important source of saplings for afforestation ecosystem as organisations from far and wide reach out for saplings and support.

As we walk out of the Nursery, one cannot miss the aroma of the lunch, a meal that is prepared specially to meet that energy needs and palette staff toiling under sun, climbing the mountain for afforestation work. At lunch, Shyam and Ramya were discussing their next seed collection trip with Parasuram to nearby forest at



Polur. Seed collection is a yearlong effort that requires an understanding of Biology, Ecology, Native understanding of seeds & germination and physical endurance. The

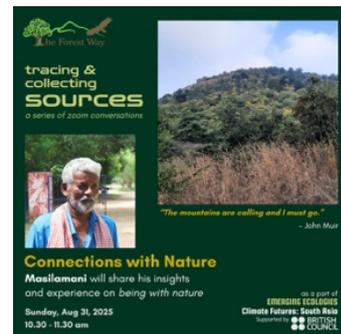
larger space where Nursery is housed is envisioned to be an arboretum. It is spread over acres with many features and highlights. A museum is a key highlight with paintings, pictures, literature on trees and afforestation work. Aesthetics form an essential part of The Forest Way's activities. An evidence of it is a huge boulder abutting the museum which is being meticulously sculpted into a spectacular wall featuring reptiles and animals under the supervision of Kumar, an avid bird watcher. Kumar's other creation is a walkabout featuring dozens of tall granite slabs with paintings and descriptions of the birds, animals, and reptiles found in this forest. All of these are an attempt to leave one with an indelible impression that afforestation is not just about green cover, but an effort to reinvigorate a complex ecosystem.



Walk on the hill, gives a glimpse of the fruits of all the efforts of The Forest Way. As we walked, I was lucky enough to taste the seasons last remaining Nana Pazham(a small white translucent berry). Enroute, Arun explains the 3 decade story of this transformation – learning through cycles of seasons, weather, ecology and events triggered by humans. Each place on the hill has now come to bear a name given by The Forest Way – like Sarukku Parai, Owl Rock, Evergreen Patch, Windy Patch etc.

Coincidentally, a zoom session anchored by Naren and

Krishnapriya featured Masilamani, who in 90 minutes spoke about his work from early days, love for his work, dealing with grades and shades of everything, reverence to the hill, sensitivity to nature et al. Every point he made in the session resonated, as one walked up the hill.



What emerges most powerfully from The Forest Way's work is that this extraordinary transformation stems from a profound love for the natural world, which kindle a light that spreads far beyond the boundaries of any single hill or nursery, illuminating a path toward a more harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

**Thamarai Kolam:** A waterbody that was once largely encroached upon, now offers the most spectacular view of Arunachala and serves as a much-loved refuge for the public. A promenade stretching several hundred meters stands as testimony to how aesthetics, utility, and sustainability can harmoniously converge.



One cannot help but marvel at the fractal geometry of this climbing feature which is now the literal centerpiece, surrounded by slides, pergolas, an amphitheater, outdoor calisthenics and parkour facilities. Govinda, the architect behind this civic recreational space, believes that every place should resonate with the spirit of its surroundings. In keeping with this, the landscaping weaves together native greenery, naturally positioned boulders, and traditional stone masonry. The touch of Marudam is evident in the murals on the walls, painted by school children.



### **In Sum**

The Forest Way calls itself "a work in progress"—an honest acknowledgment that they learn by doing, adjusting their methods as seasons and experiences teach them. Their activities weave together practical environmental work with deeper questions about how humans can relate to nature and create sustainable communities. What makes their approach distinctive is how openly they work, creating space for ownership and involvement from everyone—local communities, institutions, government departments, and individuals who find their way to this community at the base of Arunachala hill.