For the past 11 years of my life, I have been trying to get my head around what learning is, and how a school should be designed to facilitate learning in a natural environment. You know, humans were supposed to learn in an open setting, and not in packed classrooms. From Gandhi, to Aurobindo, to Osho, all these super humans have talked a lot about education and learning, but none of them actually ran a school. To philosophize is human, but to take action is superhumanly creative.

After intellectualizing for years, and philosophizing for eons, I finally took a leap of faith and quit my cushiony job in air conditioned cubicles, and decided to go see some of the superhumans first hand, and understand what their missions were all about, and how they got to doing things, and not make too much fuss about theories and philosophies.

After reading, talking to friends and practitioners, there were about a couple who stood out. These were people who were not descendants of great sages and seers, not big brand names charging a ton to help your offspring learn, but were folks who had dedicated their life to figure out themselves, and then create a DNA of their own version to impart a way of life to children. The first logical choice for me then, was to visit Meenakshi at Nagarkoodal, 9 kms away from Nallampalli on the busy Dharmapuri – Salem highway.

The mid day sun was out by the time I reached Nagarkoodal in November last year. It was a kilometre to Puvidham Learning centre, and I was walking the last bit, when a government jeep stopped by, and asked me if I was headed to meet Meenakshi, to which I nodded in the affirmative. They quickly got down, took my bag, opened the back door of the jeep and made sure I hopped in. They said my hostess is the rock star social activist of the area, and I was doing the right thing by visiting her. She seemed to be an untouchable for mortals like us. But the question I asked myself was social activist?

Meenakshi was teaching Math to 7th & 8th graders when I got to see her the moment I landed on campus. Talking in fluent Tamil, it was a stunning surprise in store for me to know that she was originally from Meerut, and now was a prime citizen of this area, walking the talk of actually trying to give the children here a chance to go and cling on to their own lives with hope.

Set on a water conserved land of arid not so lucky area of Tamil Nadu, she has set up a space where 100 children come and learn Math, Science, English, Tamil, craft, farming, and a way of life. A life which instils discipline, allows them to have fun (lots of it), stay in a residential hostel if they need to, learn Karate, and cook their own food for the 4 ‘o clock snack as a community of children. Not to forget the indulgence of the 11 ‘o clock pampering of Raagi biscuits.

The place runs like a smooth Swiss clock. Teachers know what they are doing, children are picked up, dropped, water is brought in if required, connections are made with the outside world for kids to get exposure to the bigger world outside, and all this is the pride of the small town, where there is a government school right across from Puvidham. The children segregate plastic from metal, and metal from paper and form different disposal heaps, they use a manual foot pump to get water into the over head tank, and they play on the merry go around, which runs the flour mill, and also collect their own waste to make natural manure out of it. Cows are taken care of so that the yogurt is fed to the children at lunch time, but more importantly they learn empathy towards animal kind.

The uniqueness of each child stands out, since Meenakshi, the teachers, and Puvidham gives them the space and time to discover themselves. So while Lokesh makes some amazing moves on the board of chess which most of us cannot get our heads around, and really is inconsistent with mathematics, it allows us to spend more time with him to understand his road blocks and sort it out. Soon we figure out he is good with math too. There is Hemant who is amazing with handicrafts. There is someone else who is so good with painting that Rajesh, the handicrafts and arts teacher from Santiniketan, works with this budding artist to paint sections of the campus, village bus stand, and some displays on a discarded wall in a neighbouring village, 1 km away from Puvidham. There is Lokesh’s sister who is a super athlete and plays that running game around seated children with ease, and never gets caught, and ignorant city folk like me do not even remember the name of the game.

What is surprising is Meenakshi’s humbleness after having created a space for village children, which people like me only talk about and dream of. In addition, her insights on humans, children, life, and schools is so fundamentally simple and not any simpler, that it keeps you in check to not over complicate the entire concept of education. For me, education and learning boils down to removing fear, building emotional intelligence, and finally giving the person the space to find out how they want to live their lives.

The children become lazy at times, and Meenakshi reminds them that it takes a lot to run this space, and they need to look at it from a mature perspective and not take things for granted. The children in turn take it in the right spirit, convene, discuss, and figure out solutions. So while I was around, some children were busy selling handicrafts to show case their skills to the outside world, while some children were learning basics of mechanics and electrical engineering to sort out the problem of automating a flour mill. A few girls like Pooja and Mekhala were inspiring the lazy boys to do a better job in maintaining the cleanliness of the hostel, and set up proper processes and protocols for this to materialize. The maturity, the poise, and ability to take lead, is what will make a difference in the long run.

Life is not perfect, nor is this world, nor are you and I perfect, and nor is Puvidham, and Meenakshi knows this. After having done so much, she still asks around, looks around, talks around, and tries to experiment and do small big things to make life here much better for the children, who will go out and try and give a positive spin to Earth tomorrow. She is a true mentor to the children and teachers, she is an idol for the villagers, and now she is getting in people to do some hard core water conservation in the area, and inspire a woman or 2 to run for the panchayat elections. Slow and steady, through grit, perseverance, and patience. She looks to be in her elements, when she goes barefoot on a bike to run a small errand, and getting things done, and not waiting for someone else to come in and do the needful. It humbles you, gives your mortal soul wings to cling on to and fly, and works as an electric shock and rise up, away from your limitations to try and make a difference.

With all this and more, Meenakshi makes the best south Indian food I have eaten, she makes the best pickles and coffee, the children make the most cost effective Aloe Vera soaps, and the 2 ladies in the kitchen make the best meals for children, which visitors like me can hog on for all it’s worth. I was on campus staying with the children for 25 days, and not for once did I feel out of place, and for all those days, the children accepted me whole heartedly. With the ways of the world, the wickedness of the world had permeated by body, it is here I found liberation from myself, because the children accepted me for who I was, and opened their own worlds to me.