

Site Visit Report - February 25-26, 2020



During one of my meetings with Asha Bangalore in 2009, I was discussing about cycling around some of the interior parts of Tamil Nadu. I was suggested going for a visit to either of the two projects that Asha supports in Dharmapuri district - Puvudham and Thulir. Before deciding about it, I was introduced to Anu and Krishna, and the choice was made easier. I undertook a cycling trip in June 2009 and thus started a my decade-long relationship with Thulir. In other words, a cycling trip to Puvudham was late by a decade! So, when I planned for a cycling trip to visit projects supported by Asha, Puvudham became a natural choice. Puvudham is located about 200 Kms from my home town and I preferred to ride over two days. I reached Mettur on February 24th, stayed overnight, and departed on the morning of 25th to Puvudham. You can read about my cycling trip here - <https://balaji.run/2020/03/25/tour-for-asha/>

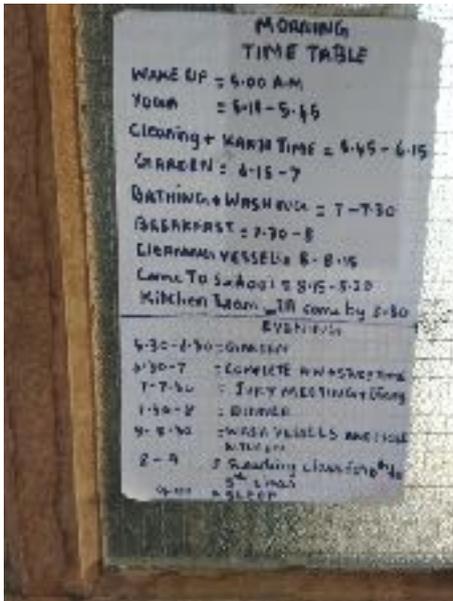
I spent the afternoon of 25th with Meenakshi, the founder of Puvudham school, listening to her journey with Puvudham for more than 2 decades - yet another fascinating and inspiring story of someone working in remote villages of India. Meenakshi was scheduled to visit Bangalore on the following day for personal errands and gave me quick overview of Puvudham and her journey over the years of running the institution.

I attended the class on spinning where children were taught to use a *takli* or drop spindle to extract yarn from cotton. It was my first attempt to use it and I fumbled at every step. The children took to it like a fish to a water and some of them have already started using a charkha to extract yarn. The words of Mahatma Gandhi resonated very well on that day,

“The spinning-wheel rules out exclusiveness. It stands for all inclusiveness. It stands for all including the poorest. It, therefore, requires us to be humble and to cast away pride completely.”



At the core of Puvudham is the ‘Gandhian’ way of life - self-reliance, simplicity, community living, caring for nature, self-respect, and others that helps children to grow with confidence. I also witnessed the working of a human-powered grinder that has been locally made for grinding pulses and grains. The children also engage in farming and gardening in the vast campus of Puvudham, albeit with less access to water. Most crops are rain-fed and sometimes with drip irrigation. The campus also houses few cows of local breed, goats, and country hen - lovingly cared for by the students at teachers. You can see their daily timetable in the adjacent image.



I spent the evenings at the hostel, where the children and staff take care of the running the hostel from cleaning to cooking.

Humans of Puvudham

An institution is all about the people who are associated with it. Apart from Meenakshi and few students, I took some time to talk to few of the teachers/interns/volunteers at Puvudham.

Madhavraj - I was welcomed to Puvudham by Madhavraj and he also guided me to Puvudham from Mettur. He is also familiar to Asha, having worked for a few months with Asha Bangalore about a decade back. Unfortunately, he could not be around on February 26 as he had to attend a personal emergency in Salem.

Jaya - Jaya has joined Puvudham from West Bengal, two years back and her daughter also studies in Puvudham. She had worked for 15 years in conventional schools before deciding to move on to alternative schools. While she has difficulties in learning Tamil,

her daughter seems comfortable conversing in Tamil. She handles classes for children in 3rd and 4th grades.

Krishna Devi - Krishna Devi hails from the nearby village and handles class 6th and 7th. Her two daughters also studies at Puvudham.

Rajani - Rajani hails from Nagaland and has travelled and lived all over India. She is currently volunteering at Puvudham and is presently learning about various social organisations all over India, with aspirations to start one on her own. She is volunteering at Puvudham with her two daughters. She teaches Yoga to children and Hindi to teachers.



Madhiazhagan - Madhiazhagan hails from the neighbouring village and in addition to teaching duties, he also drives the van for children to commute to school.

Haripriya - Haripriya has joined Puvudham recently. A former HR professional from Chennai, her interests in Education led her to Puvudham and is currently interning at Puvudham.

Meera - Meera hails from Nallampalli near Dharmapuri and joined Puvudham about a year back. She had completed her class 12 and could not join college due to personal issues. Although hesitant initially, she eventually opened up to tell her story. Ignoring what happened to her in the past, she is extremely happy to have joined Puvudham and credits the learning in the past one year to improving her confidence. She is very passionate about animals and takes care of the cows, goats, and the hen in the campus. She finds opportunities to learn about the animals, how to take care of them, and understand them better by working on them. In some way, apart from teaching the younger children, she also continues to learn in Puvudham.



Shanbhaga, Sara, Ebi - Other teachers to whom I was introduced but couldn't interact much.

In summary, Puvidham offers an excellent 'space' for people to explore away from mainstream education. The opportunities that it provides to students, volunteers, teachers, and other stake holders are immense. The children of Puvidham along with some of the staff had undertaken a long bicycle ride recently and it was heartening to hear about their efforts. Their adventures in ordinary bikes made mine look a lot more easier.

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