

SITE VISIT REPORT

Me and my father travelled to Puvudham on the 05th of January 2018. We rented a car with a driver and reached Puvudham at about 11 AM.

The children were rehearsing for their annual day when we arrived. Meenakshi was warm and welcoming as usual. We began with a tour of the school given by Meenakshi. The main building shown below was being expanded with more rooms on the first floor.



While one of them is being converted into a library, two other rooms were being built for computers and crafts. From the building's aesthetics and construction, one could really appreciate Meenakshi's architectural background. The floors were being constructed out of the trunks of betel trees and bamboo donated from a nearby farm. Also, most of the buildings in Puvudham are run from solar power and solar panel installations around the place.



We then proceeded to see the new hostel near the school. The new hostel looks quite impressive and consists of two floors. The ground floor is the boys dormitory and is also used as an auditorium. They use it for film and documentary screenings. The first floor is the girls dormitory. At the back of the hostel, there is a mini swimming pool too!



Apart from the merry-go-round that also is a grain mill (that I saw on my visit last time), they had a new device that compacts plastic. Puvudham is helping the community to collect and clear plastic. They were looking for a proper outlet to dispose or reuse them. A mechanical engineer who visited Puvudham helped build this simple machine that compacts the plastic fed in to cubes as shown below. Meenakshi is planning to use these as part of wall construction materials.



We also got a glimpse of the range of craftwork being done by the children (and often refined by the teachers). The range of crafts included handmade soaps, crafts from coconut shells, puzzles, recyclable sanitary napkins, clay paintings, cloth and paper bags. In the last year, they sold these products in local markets and are getting more requests for products like soaps. The diversity of crafts was much appreciated, however, Afe plans to advise them that they be careful about their business model, since they could be treading a fine line between child labour and hands-on learning if they actively take orders!



We then sat down with the children to have an interactive session. My father had prepared a fun quiz and we split the children into two teams. We asked some questions drawing on mathematical concepts and did some experiments and asked to explain the result they saw. We also asked some questions that drew on Puvudham's nature based learning. The children were very bold and we had very interesting discussions. Good answers were rewarded with small gifts! My father regularly interacts with children from many schools in Tamil nadu since he sponsors scholarships at a number of schools and often conducts interactive quizzes like these. He opined that the children here did much better as compared to other schools and he felt their concepts had a firm foundation! This comment from my father made a huge difference to the teachers and Meenakshi.



We then had lunch at Meenakshi's house. We asked her about how they are managing in terms of teacher recruitment. She said although there are a few who have stayed on for years, there still remains a problem of teacher dropouts especially women. Some of the childrens' parents who live in the school help with teaching as well. Puvudham will need to come up a long-term plan for teacher recruitment, training and retaining them and we can help them towards this in terms of strategy. My father and Meenakshi also plan to work together to help setup computer training or IT skills training in a drive to improve employability of those leaving the school. We also spoke about the plans of extending the school beyond 8th standard. Meenakshi said she did pursue this, but is being badgered

by the state government for hefty bribes. Hence, these plans are now on hold unless the education minister for the district changes to somebody honest! After lunch, we drove back to Chennai. Me and my father really enjoyed our visit albeit a brief one.

