

Schooling for curiosity

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An ear to the ground: Students visit a ration shop to learn how the public distribution system works



- Where art lives: Students dabble in pottery, thread work, paper craft, sculpture and various art forms within school



• Marudam Farm School Melting pot: At Marudam Farm School, you can learn Maths through cooking, goat-rearing, or even pottery, depending on whatever tickles your fancy

Inside the Marudam Farm School at Tiruvannamalai, time is just a bystander, not allowed the privilege of calling the shots. On a Friday morning, a busload of chatty children — some well-clothed, some barefoot — come bumping along a dusty road to be deposited at the 9.5-acre expanse of fertile land that's their school. A large terracotta horse stands at the entrance and other semi-finished sculptures and pottery experiments lie around. You spot cows grazing and hear birds chattering amid the rustle of the coconut trees. Leaving the bustle of the town outside the gates, the school's 70-odd children step into a world of sublime difference.

If the rains had been better they would have been thrashing harvested paddy, but today the students are digging pits to plant lemon, tapioca and papaya saplings. Some are preparing a large mulch bed by spreading dried leaves, readying it for a vegetable garden that will be sustained by diverting used kitchen water. At the nursery, a few others are mixing 'jeevamrit' in a giant blue tub by emptying into it buckets of jaggery, cow urine, cow dung, chickpea flour and termite soil. "The mixture aids bacterial growth and helps keep the organic farm soil fertile," says Madhavan, a 16-year-old student.

"We usually grow 85 per cent of the school's food requirement in-house," says Arun Venkataraman, 48, who founded the school together with his wife, Poornima, eight years ago. A qualified engineer who went on to pursue a BA and BEd to become a teacher, Venkataraman initially taught gardening at Chennai's The School. Poornima used to be a teacher at the Theosophical Society's Olcott Memorial School in the city. Before long, the couple moved 190 km south to Tiruvannamalai, to start Marudam.

"Marudam (farmland in Tamil) was born out of a need to provide a space for 'learning by doing', academics, nature and 'unstructured time'," says Venkataraman. He believes that an education system that constantly tells children what to think, dampens their curiosity and love for learning. On Thursdays, they climb the Arunachala hill, mostly in silence. If a question is asked, together the answers are found. On returning they discuss what they discovered about

the hill and within their own selves. Thursdays are also movie days. Majid Majidi's lyrical Baran is what the kids watched last.

Of the learner, by the learner

The school follows a principle of democratic learning. The class size is small, only 4-10, to ensure the facilitators well understand the interests of the children. Once that is identified, they run with it, no matter how unrealistic it may appear.

Mathematics is taught through baking, cooking, goat-rearing or even pottery, depending on whatever strikes a chord with the batch. "One batch studied oceans and nothing else for an entire academic year of geography class. The children simply couldn't get enough," Venkataraman recalls. Ocean currents, tides, oceanbeds, depth, pressure, underwater life... they trawled through it all. That included a walk on Chennai beach to rescue Olive Ridley turtles. It was followed by a year of deserts and then rainforests. They visited the Wayanad rainforests in Kerala, and the nearby Javadi hills, living and breathing the jungles with the forest tribes.

Two-third of the school's children live in Tiruvannamalai. Their parents are farmers, cattle rearers, domestic help, drivers or small shop owners. The rest include children from expat families that have made a home in this town — famous for several spiritual centres — in their quest for an alternative lifestyle.

To remain inclusive, the school allows families to pay whatever fee they can afford and finds sponsors to pitch in with the rest. Panjali, 38, is a cook and a single parent in Tiruvannamalai. Her two boys were beaten and abused by the teachers at the private school they attended previously. Marudam welcomed them with an open heart.

"My family warned that my boys would become rowdies with so much freedom, but now this freedom is all I want for them," she says, beaming; her younger son is proving to be a math whiz, while the older one is obsessed about becoming a football player. Both speak perfect English.

A donation of ₹35,000 takes care of the annual schooling cost of a child at Marudam — three-fourth of the school's children are sponsored by individual donors. "Is the model sustainable? Of course not! But I believe there is enough goodwill in this country to sustain what we have been doing for the past eight years," says Venkataraman.

The continually evolving curriculum draws from several methodologies ranging from the philosophy of J Krishnamurti, Waldorf, Montessori, Sudbury Valley school, UK's Summer Hill, and "just about any bright democratic idea" that the 70-odd students, 20 teachers or a handful of volunteers come up with.

"As long as our schools produce unthinking robotic people who don't question the established norms of hierarchy, human beings will become irrelevant," says Govinda, 42, the in-house radical and consultant. Warning about an imminent environmental apocalypse — "200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal go extinct every day", Marudam is a counter-current, he explains.

Appeared on 4th March 2017