

This farm school redefines traditional ways of education

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Started in Tiruvannamalai by a community of like-minded individuals, who were vexed by the ‘system’, Marudam Farm School is here to break all the stereotypes of how a child ought to be nurtured.



Children engage in craft session, farming, physical education and field trips

Chennai:

Discontent with their lives, unhappy with their workplaces and fed up with being part of a corrupt and negative system is how most of the creators of Marudam Farm School wandered and ended up in Tiruvannamalai like cows gone astray. They might have been clueless about what to do next, but they had an aim, a very clear one — to lead a simple, self-sufficient life with minimal material and needs. The elders soon found work that supported their ideals but the lack of a good school in the vicinity prompted them to start one themselves.

Swimming against the tide to be where they are today certainly wasn't easy for all — some got ostracised from their families for leaving well-paid jobs and “successful” careers. “But what really is success?” asks Arun Venkataramanan, one of the founders of the school. “It’s

quite expected, yet funny, that most of us here are former engineers,” he scoffs, dismissing the current education system.

What makes this school unique

It all begins there for a child; his or her future is based on what the parents impart and what they learn in school. In the case of children studying at Marudam Farm School, they can put any formally educated, urban child to shame. “We have kids from villages and towns surrounding Tiruvannamalai, children of disillusioned city parents like us and those of foreign immigrants, who chose the spiritual life,” explains Arun, adding, “Our approach to education is through learning by doing, seeing, playing and feeling free.” Books only contribute to 20 per cent of learning.

‘Intelligence is relative’

He illustrates with an example as to how intelligence is not only through bookish knowledge — “An 18-year-old girl at our school cannot read or learn from textbooks to save her life but she’s one of the most intelligent, street-smart youngsters I’ve seen. She can take a herd of 40-50 goats to graze, come back and cook for her entire family and run the household when her parents are away without facing any difficulty.” He adds, “I’ve never seen anyone interpret objects the way she does; she’s absolutely alive to the world and is a great observer.”

Educating children through a variety of mediums such as art, craft and games exposes them to multiple experiences, which they’re then free to opt as a career. “We encourage them to do whatever they like — my son (who also studies at Marudam) plays the tabla and is interested in art, which I have no intentions of admonishing,” Arun shares.

Teachers at the institution draw salaries determined by their familial conditions (the more the members the more the pay) and the school charges a minimal fee — students’ families pay whatever they can afford. The rest of the costs is covered by sponsors.

Breaking barriers of the classroom

What started off in a rented meditation hall with 20 students, Marudam Farm School today has added a hundred more to its roll call. The land where the current campus stands was donated by well-wishers and has come alive with beautifully architected buildings. “Left to the bunch of us founders, we wouldn’t have wanted buildings at all but due to government rules, we had to construct a school. An architect, who’s a dear friend, helped us design classrooms that were more than just boxes.” Corners became curves, walls became waves, amphitheatres were added and so was landscaping. He further elaborates, “We’ve experimented with different materials like mud, plaster and cow dung mixtures, mud blocks, jack arch roofs with terracotta and tiles and so on.”

The community's contribution to going green

Every single step has been a team effort by the families that stay there as a happy, united community. "Like ants trickling towards sugar, so many of us from across the world came together leaving behind our pasts to build a productive, greener future," says Arun. Speaking of greener, the school is also home to an organic farm where teachers, students and residents alike toil to see the fruits of their labour. He remarks, "We start the day by doing some physical activity on the farm. We're also engaging in afforestation programs on the hills of Tiruvannamalai, we've already built a community park and are in the process of constructing one more."