

# Marudam Farm School: becoming while it is being

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Marudam Farm School and Nursery, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India

The moment I entered Arun's home in the Marudam Farm School, I knew I was in an unfamiliar but welcoming place. There was a joyful little bustle of a few people in the main room: Karthik was preparing dinner of several dishes; Poornima played the harmonium, heartily practicing the new song she learned from some of her tribal friends in order to sing it with her students in school; neighbor Leela came by to see how the weekend went with the turtle walk; a couple toads hopped around from under the shelves piled with various genres of books while the two dogs walked amongst us with a questioning look to understand what all the noise was about; and of course, there was the new buzz and laughter brought in by those of us who had been at the turtle walk in Chennai, a 5-hour bus ride away. (Arun runs a volunteer marine turtle protection program in Chennai, with which he has been involved for over 18 years. Since he moved to Tiruvannamalai for the farm school, he has been taking this round trip journey almost every weekend to continue his volunteer work). I was surrounded by characters as assorted as colors on a palette, yet the farm school was the painting where they all found a common existence.



*Arun playing table tennis with his son Madhavan*

I was not the only 'outsider' in the farm. Several travelers were visiting the school and exposing the students to their colorful backgrounds, as it happens throughout the year. Among them was Samuel, a French animator who was there for the second time. He was working with the kids to complete an animation video, which they had started last year. He also helped them edit together a silent movie that many students had been involved in shooting for a couple of months already. Additionally, there was Solenne, a musician, also from France. Solenne attended some of the classes with her accordion and later, working together with the students, composed the soundtrack for the silent film. It was a 'goosebumpy' experience to watch the first screening of that funny film with Solenne's live contribution and the roaring laughter of kids. I wish when I was kid we had travelers of distant lands visit our school and hang out with us. And all this is in addition to the really cool resident volunteers and teachers of arts, crafts, theater, martial arts and gymnastics, and other more 'usual' school subjects.



*Samuel and Alice (founder-teacher) editing the silent film together with the students*



*Solenne, a French volunteer visitor of the school contributing live soundtrack for the first screening of a silent film produced by the students*



*Sewing is one of the many skills students gain in Marudam*

The backgrounds of the students themselves were as diverse. There were students from the nearby village or from the town of Tiruvannamalai, or the children of those who live on the farm. Of all these, some were children of foreign families, adding to the diversity of interests, skills, talents, languages, and perspectives. The time I spent in that farm school was marked particularly by conversations with these friendly souls of all ages. Our topics included, but were not limited to, architecture, agriculture, communal living, history of Tiruvannamalai and of India in general, as well as that of Cyprus, its flora and fauna, and more. Arun's unending appetite and enthusiasm for knowledge seemed to be contagious on the school-kids. I had the chance to sit in a handful of the classes Arun conducts and instead of following the usual curriculum we had discussion sessions where we talked about my island's geography, history and politics, addressing numerous curious questions from the youngsters. I also showed a selection of photographs of my family, our lifestyle, and of Cyprus in general. I was pleasantly surprised to hear the students repeat key elements of our conversations even with details in the following days and to hear that one of them even shared his excitement at home with his parents.

Since 2012, Marudam has got recognition from the Board of Elementary Education to run the school as an elementary and primary school, up to 5<sup>th</sup> standard. Last year, they built more classrooms, a library and a lab as part of the ongoing process of upgrading the recognition up to class 8. Along with other stringent requirements of the Tamil Nadu Government, such as the stability certificate for buildings, fire department certificate ensuring fire protection, sanitation and hygiene certificate, the recognition, too, has to be renewed every three years. The school founders have been taking the necessary steps to meet these demands in a long and tedious journey, making the school very much possible to function.



Students on a treehouse they built on their own initiative

I observed a general sense of wellbeing within the space; a space which is somewhat loosely defined, physically, by the curvy walls, round entrances and some doorless classrooms, but a space that is filled, spiritually, with laughter of children and teachers alike. The communal feeling I experienced in Arun's home was prevalent in the school where I noticed a caring and nurturing vertical interaction among different age groups. Even though the students have classes with their peers, there are plenty of activities for students of different ages to participate together, starting within the school and expanding from there: for one, the students occasionally take part in caring for the organic fields of the farm to provide as much as 80% of the food served in school; also, they go to a local swimming pool in groups to play and learn swimming from the teachers as well as from each other; then there is the forest-park and the sacred Arunachala Hill, the "Hill of Wisdom," where they go every week for half a day of group hiking and solitary time, immersing themselves into the generosity of the biodiversity of the place.



Students and teachers singing songs at the park before they start their weekly hike



Creative approaches have been used in the school's architecture



Kindergarten students helping out with the peanut harvest



One of the students observing the birds during the weekly solitary nature time in the park



*Students and teachers do not feel confined within walls of a classroom*



**A group photo from a group hike up the Arunachala hill**

The park was once a garbage yard with sparse tree cover before a handful of people including Govinda and Leela (co-founders of the farm school) took over the space and turned it into an expanding forest, albeit through years of stubborn struggles against the tough conditions of the area. Painstaking efforts to plant and protect the trees, as well as preventing fires helped the saplings get a 'roothold' on the barren soil, resulting in rapid returning of the forest around the hill. Now they grow more than 100 species of native trees and shrubs in their nursery, constantly adding to the forest. Nearby, an adjoining playground with handcrafted equipment attracts people in hundreds during the weekends, as it is the only recreational space in town. An ongoing construction will turn into a space that aims to connect children to their immediate natural habitat through various exploratory games and visual images.



*A local lady is working at the nursery of the park, arranging new saplings*

Marudam Farm School is still very young, it's becoming while it is being. It has many creative and motivated people like Arun, Poornima, Govinda and Leela caring for it as if it was their child. They still have many questions of their own about how and how much to influence the paths of the young minds during these precious years. They seek answers to these questions as they come up, together with the children and their parents. The kids, in my opinion, are surrounded by a lot of goodness in that school. They have access to an abundance of diverse knowledge and skills of the adults; they experience plenty of nurturing relationships with their peers, students of different ages, teachers and guests; they are exposed to a conscious way of living that respects the environment and its diversity within an organic farm that is also mostly powered by renewable energy; and they are encouraged to connect with nature and participate in the reforestation of the park, which is an invaluable experience for any human being. I will be interested in following up with Marudam and see how they grow.



**Two kindergarten kids in the playground just outside the classroom**

Contact *the Author*