



JOURNEYING WITH NATURE THE FOREST WAY

• - Arun -

It all began when Govinda planted a few tree saplings on the Arunachala hill to celebrate his daughter Priya's birth. This simple act touched an inner chord in him. It was the beginning of a new journey for him and his wife and work partner Leela. At that time, they couldn't have predicted how this journey would unfold.

Priya, recently completed 18 years and I, Arun, Govinda's friend, neighbour and work partner, will take some time off to look back at this journey. It will be impossible to cover all aspects in a single short article, so I will focus on one major aspect, which defines us, that of facilitating nature engagement for people.

In 2003, Govinda was approached by the District collector and District forest officer to create a park at the base of the hill. Govinda and Leela were touched by the immense trust placed on them and took the offer seriously and created a wonderful park with a lot of creativity and inputs from friends from Auroville. The park has two parts. The region in the front with two water bodies, play equipment etc serves as a children's park, which of course people of all ages enjoy. This park was the only outdoor nature place for the town people for the most part of the last two decades.

The inner region of the park which is heavily wooded, has served as a nature education space for students of all ages. Over the years scores of children have spent hours engaging with nature. They work in the tree nursery which generates saplings of native trees of around 180 species. They learn about the native trees



on the hills by studying the local species of

trees by walking around the arboretum which showcases large native trees such as Indian laburnum, flame of the forest, different types of native fig trees, Jamun, Child life tree, Kamala tree, Sandpaper tree, Pongam, silk cotton tree etc.,

The students also learn about the various bird species which are found in and around Thiruvannamalai. Currently our count stands at 227 species. The numbers have steadily gone up as the forest cover returns to the sacred Arunachala. More about that later. The students learn about snakes and birds through the beautifully painted cuddapah boards created by our resident artist and ornithologist, Sivakumar.

Their nature experience is completed with a walk on one of the trails on the hill and a rich interaction in the nature interpretation centre which is located in the inner regions of the park. The beauty of this centre is that it is not visible from even a hundred yards away as it blends with the surroundings with its own cactus garden on the roof.

Govinda and Leela moved from strength to strength after creating the park. They envisioned and created a trust called The Forest Way Trust, of which I am a trustee. Once the trust was set up, our work and our lives took off and the journey has taken us to unimagined places.

We started a school, called Marudam Farm School on land gifted to us by a philanthropic friend. This land which is about 12 acres now serves as an organic farm, houses the school and is the residence of the Marudam community of seven families and various other members, volunteers etc. We all try to live in harmony with nature as sustainably as possible. The whole land is powered by solar panels. We have our own water sources, use dry compost toilets. We run our own organic store which is accessible to friends and supporters and through

all this minimise the waste that we generate. But we still end up generating some and we are constantly trying to reduce the same.

Marudam Farm School is run by a group of nearly 30 staff members with my wife/ work partner, Poornima, leading the team. Marudam has had its own journey which needs its own article. Suffice to say here that while it is a school for children of all backgrounds over the years we are focusing more on providing education for the children of the surrounding villages. Children learn various skills which are connected to their lives such as farming while also learning a lot about nature through deep nature interaction. Here it is worthy to note that Marudam conducts a craft week annually where children from various schools are taught traditional skills by village artisans.



What started off with a few trees in 2003 went on to grow to a nursery which generates tens of thousands of saplings each year, of which we plant a minimum of 15000 trees on the hill and around the hill. Over the last 18 years we have planted 2.5 lakh trees. While we strive to bring back the forests we also need to contend with the ubiquitous fires, particularly in summer which damage forests across India and the rest of the world. The Forest Way creates and maintains around 25 kms of fire lines across the hill to prevent intentional or accidental fires from spreading. We also actively put out fires with our fire fighting team any time of the day or year. We do this work in collaboration with Annamalai reforestation society and Swami Brahmananda of Ramana ashram. Thanks to all this the forests have bounced back on the hill. Bird populations have burgeoned. Streams are flowing for several months each year, charging lakes and tanks, which results in better ground water and this in turn helps farmers. The green cover has even changed the monsoon pattern with Thiruvannamalai erstwhile known for its dry heat receiving much more rain over the last decade. There is also a tremendous increase in the population of deer and also of porcupines, civet cats, langurs and many such forest animals..

We have documented the steady rise in biodiversity and in the process teach students the ways of documenting. We have recorded our bird observations in e

-bird and other observations like butterflies, moths, snakes, trees etc in other portals like the India Biodiversity One, Nature Watch etc. We have published a book on the birds of Thiruvannamalai and we are currently working on a book of butterflies.

Through the covid times we worked to provide food relief for affected people and reached out to around 5000 families since 2020. We are currently creating one more park inside the town on the bund of Thamarai kolam for the use of the town people. Our weaving centre is trying to generate livelihood for village people by teaching them various skills like embroidery, crochet etc.

Our organic store tries to strengthen the local economy connecting small local farmers with local consumers thereby benefiting both and reducing waste generation.

We are very grateful that we have been supported in all these efforts by various people without whose help all this would have not been possible