

A Community's Portrayal of Smog in Chennai
 Essay and photographs by Kim Abeles

Pugai Padam: When Smog Makes Art at Art Houz, Nungambakkam, Chennai, India

Pugai Padam Collective is a coalition of youth groups and art-activists who have been creating with visual art, theater, music, and poetry to call attention to air pollution in southern India. A particular concern is for the fishers of Ennore where power plants and fertilizer manufacturing have decimated the air and water. The Collective connects community and the arts to educate and bring attention to the issues.

The site of the *Pugai Padam* exhibition was Art Houz, a beautiful gallery located in Nungambakkam, Chennai. The exhibition was presented from February 6-8, 2026, and the space was activated as an interconnected dynamic. A continuous series of visiting groups lent an optimistic attentiveness to the space. The importance of this dedicated engagement -- tackling the dismal topic of industrial air pollution -- was taken a step further by interaction with a wide variety of groups. Artists and their supporters were invited, but the visiting groups involved a broader balance: all age groups; students of social justice, sciences and art; environmental organizations; and, workers whose jobs are especially affected by air pollution including Veera Pengal Munnetra Sangam, a union of women auto drivers.



Veera Pengal Munnetra Sangam, a cooperative of women auto drivers, visiting the *Pugai Padam* exhibit;
 Images at top of page: Smog Collector created in Ennore, and the poster for the Art Houz exhibit/events

Writer and environmental justice advocate Nityanand Jayaraman refers to the art and environment exhibitions and their related events as *campaigns*. By envisioning all aspects of the project in this way, expectations energize the participants in all their capacities as volunteers, individuals, artists, neighbors, viewers and presenters. And, the steps in the process require deliberation and imagination. The arts function with both qualities.

Professor Jayaraman contacted me in May 2025 after reading about my *Smog Collectors* through a colleague's curriculum. For the months that followed, we communicated through online meetings and emails, along with Vettiver Collective members Archanaa Seker, Satwik Gade, Durga Moorthy, Dhaarani, Kavi Karthik and Benisha BM. In 2026, EcoArts Connections helped fund my trip to India where I could learn more about the environmental-social justice actions and celebrate the impressive work by Pugai Padam Collective. EcoArts Connections is centered in Boulder, Colorado, and Director Marda Kirn was eager to connect with the environmental group in Chennai because the cities share serious health concerns resulting from "fly ash" or "coal ash" emitted in the air because of neglectful industrial practices.



Discussions took place online, with email and through messaging

The exhibition at Art Houz was installed by many volunteers with the guidance and curatorial direction of Satwik Gade, a talented artist in multiple mediums. He was Lead Artist in the preparation and placement of the plates to collect particulate matter from the air in fourteen locations throughout Chennai. Gade's rendered and stenciled images related to each location and developed through conversations with the person placing the glass plate at their residence or workplace.

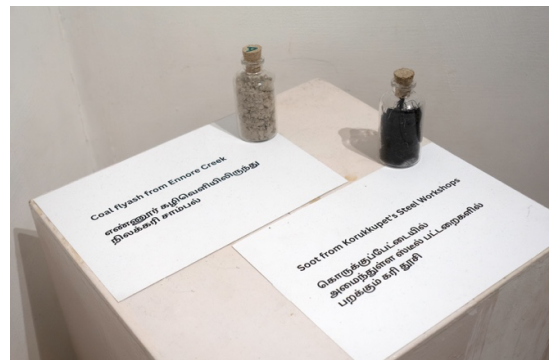


Lead Artist Satwik Gade installing at Art Houz; Photographs and a Smog Collector placed near Athipattu in Kurumedivu

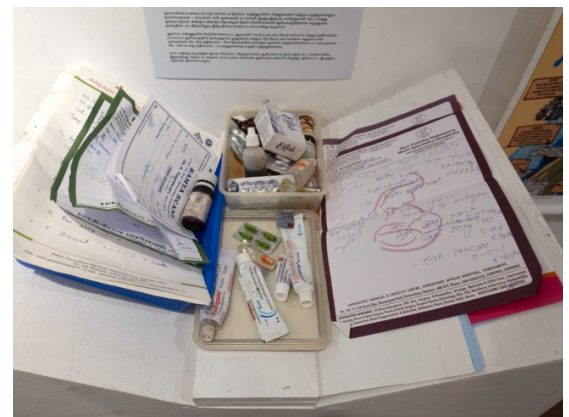


Entrance of Art Houz and an installation view of *Pugai Padam: When Smog Makes Art*

The exhibit included photographs taken at the project locations and text specifying the relevant circumstances about the location's environment. Lung x-rays, medicines, and a bottled samples of fly ash and soot added visceral details to the narrative. A child's uniform powerfully represented students' daily experience of air pollution by emphasizing the necessity of keeping a second set of clothes at school because pollution frequently caused coughing and vomiting.



A student's uniform; Photographs and a smog plate placed in Ennore; Samples of fly ash from Ennore and soot from Korukkupet



L to R clockwise: Photographs and a plate placed in Ennore, once an active fisher site and now polluted by power and fertilizer plants; Installation view; Photographs and a plate placed in Kodungaiyur; and prescribed medicines and treatments for lung damage because of the polluted air.

The Museum of Possibilities

The Pugai Padam Collective was active for months prior to the exhibit, and in the days during the final preparations, young actors were practicing for an interactive performance to take place in the gallery, poets were getting ready for an open mic at Pink Lotus, and Writer Archanaa Seker was coordinating a visit to The Museum of Possibilities for college students pursuing studies in social justice.



Archanaa Seker introduces the students to the Museum of Possibilities; Modified eating utensils in a display

The Museum is “a demonstration center for Assistive Technology for People with Disabilities across life domains.” As an interactive space, a section of it is designed as an apartment with lifestyle ideas and tools used to make daily living easier. During the visit, the students created a collaborative canvas using fly ash as the medium. This emphasized the connection between our role in society and the environment. The way we treat people is reflected in the way we care for the environment and vice versa.

This connection relates to a group interaction at the close of the *Pugai Padam* program. Twenty-five of the volunteers, staff, performers, and visual artists joined together, sitting in a circle on the floor of the gallery. Social Practice as a pedagogy encourages participants to reflect on shared experiences, creating a sense of closure that opens the way to future opportunities, both collectively and individually. What was striking about this reflection, however, was that the conversation was not complete until everyone had a chance to offer a thought. Rather than serving as an obligation, it conveyed a genuine belief in the value and importance of every individual. Here were the meaningful expressions of two dozen people and two hours of respect.



At the Museum of Possibilities, Benisha explains the process to make the fly ash painting on canvas; The resulting canvas was displayed at Art Houz exhibition.



Group photo at Art Houz following the de-install of the show

Photo courtesy Archanaa Seker

***Maasu Kadhaigal* at Art Houz**



Two scenes from the play, *Maasu Kadhaigal*. Left: Oviya, Haripriya, and Logeshwari perform in the set designed by Bhargav Prasad and Kiran. Right: Actors Ashwanth, Dharshini, Udhayapriyan, and Balamurugan along with several audience members

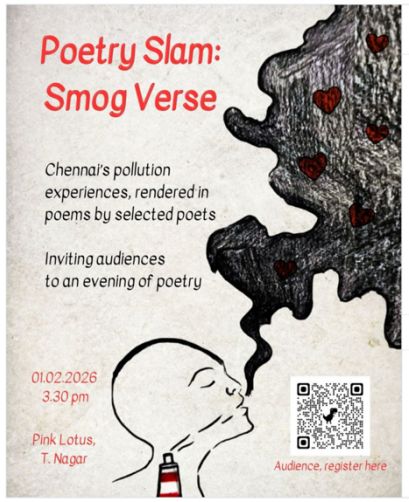
Several times each day, the installation at Art Houz was activated by the play, *Maasu Kadhaigal*, co-written with youth from the Arunodaya Centre in Royapuram, North Chennai. The students worked with Bhargav Prasad and Kiran, both of whom have active careers in theater and film. The play contains three stories centered around air pollution and the lives it touches. The actors move around the space and interact with the gallery audience in a fearless and playful way. The first story re-enacts the route to school, addressing the sites along the way that add to its peril. Fellow students join in, one by one in a growing crescendo, as they dance in and around the art.

The second story takes place within a tableau created with layers of burlap, dramatic lighting, and video projections transporting us to the metal workshop that inspired it. The gleam of the polished silver plates and pans introduces shimmering reflections into the somber scene, recalling the heavy soot described in the dialogue. The conversation among the workers is witty and sharp, creating existential moments when the audience erupted with laughter. We are privy to their banter presented with lively, well-crafted acting by Oviya, Haripriya, and Logeshwari.

The third story pulls audience members into the setting. The *doctor* in her lab coat with a stethoscope dangling around her neck scrutinizes lung x-rays. The imaging scans have been donated for the play by a local clinic, and they are now part of the narrative for each of her six *patients*. Lung diseases and related illnesses are common in Chennai, so none of this looks healthy. Then comes the droll twist to the deadly nature of the storyline. Patients requiring a transplant must choose a lung based on the neighborhood of the organ donor. Is this lung from a location that is highly toxic or “less polluted”? Ashwanth’s portrayal of the doctor is dynamic and compelling, as she cajoles patients—well played by Dharshini, Udhayapriyan, and Balamurugan—who are gradually swept into the tide of her persuasion.

Poetry Slam: Pugai Varigal at Pink Lotus

On February 1, 2026, *Poetry Slam* jumpstarted the momentum for the campaign and included twenty-five Tamil poets with spoken word and poems about “their encounters with Chennai’s pollution, shaped by stories from damaged ecologies and the lived, everyday realities of air pollution—making visible what pollution numbers often hide.” This concept of personal connection to the environment shifts our understanding. The direct experiences with pollution and degradation of the environment are specific. The winds do bring pollution from one neighborhood to another, but we cannot dismiss the local influence – a lifetime next to a factory, a heavily travelled road, a shop that grinds metal all day, fumes through the window, particulate on the sill. Your body has a story to tell that a statistic is likely to miss.



Art by Kirubavathi.s; Poster by Durga Moorthy

A poem by Kavi Karthik presented at *Poetry Slam*

இது கொடைக்கானல் அல்ல,
ஊட்டியும் அல்ல
இது ஏற்காடும் அல்ல, மேகமலையும் அல்ல

இது மேகமலை அல்ல,
கொடுங்கையூர் குப்பை மேடு போல
எங்கள் சோகங்களை எல்லாம் கொட்டி குவித்து
வைத்திருக்கும் சோகமலை

மேகமூட்டம் தழ்ந்திருப்பது போல
புகைமூட்டமா இருக்குதே
இந்த ஊரு பேரு என்ன
இது தான் நம்ம சிங்கார சென்னை!
இது எல்லோரும் அறிந்த
பெரு நகரம்
எங்கள் கோரிக்கைகளை முன்வைத்தால் மட்டும்
கண்டுக்காமல் நகரும்

This is not Kodaikanal,
nor Ooty,
This is not Yercaud, nor Meghamalai.

This is not Meghamalai.
Like the Kodungaiyur garbage dump,
this is a mountain of sorrow
where all our grief has been heaped together.

As though wrapped in mist,
it stands wrapped in smoke instead.
“What is the name of this town?”
This is indeed our Beautiful Chennai!
A great city
known by everyone.
Yet when we raise our demands,
it moves on without noticing us.

குன்னூர் மக்களுக்கு
தேயிலையே வாழ்வாதாரம்
எண்ணூர் மக்கள் நாங்க
புகையிலையே வாழுகிறோம்

தொழில் வளர்ச்சி கொடுக்குறதுக்கா
அமைக்கிறிங்க தொழிற்பேட்டை
தொழிற்பேட்டை பேரை சொல்லி
உருவாக்குறிங்க சுடுகாட்டை!

எங்க உப்பளம் நெலமெல்லாம்
கொப்பளம் ஆகுது
ஊத்து தண்ணியில
சாம்பலும் ஊறுது
ஆத்து தண்ணியில
இரால் செத்து மிதக்குது
காத்து கிடைக்கலனு
மூச்செல்லாம் திணறது
காத்துக்கிடைக்கலனு
காத்து கிடக்குறோம்

அணல் மின் நிலையம் ,
எண்ணெய் சுத்திகரிப்பு நிலையம்
ரசாயன உற்பத்தி நிலையம்
Meteorological centre
எரிந்துகொண்டே இருக்கிறது
இத்தனை நிலையத்துல
அதைவிடவும் அதிகமா எரியுது
எங்களோட வயித்துல
தூழல் - நிலையம்

அணல்மின்நிலையத்தால
இலாபம் அனுபவிச்சிட்டு
எங்கேயோ இருக்குற முதலாளிக்கு
அணல்காத்து ஆகாதுனு
24மணிநேரமும் ஏசி

அணல்மினல் நிலையம் பக்கத்துலே
அணல் காத்துக்கு மத்தியிலே
குடும்பத்தோட சாப்பிட உட்கார்ந்தா
சாப்பாடெல்லாம் சாம்பல் தூசி

அப்பாவி மக்களின்
வயிற்றில் அடிப்பதும்
நாங்கள் வாழும் இடத்தை
சீரழிப்பதும்
சரியா? தவறா? யோசி

For the people of Coonoor,
tea is their livelihood.
But we, the people of Ennore,
live by breathing smoke.

In the name of industrial growth,
you build industrial estates.
But under that very name,
you create crematoriums!

Our salt fields and paddy lands
are turning blistered and barren.
In the spring water
Even ash is seeping in.
In the river water
Prawns are floating dead.
We cannot even get clean air;
every breath struggles.
Waiting for air itself,
we continue to wait for life.

A thermal power station,
an oil refinery,
a chemical production plant,
and a meteorological centre —
everything keeps burning.
But more than all these factories,
what burns the most
is our stomachs
and the state of our environment.

The owners far away
who profit from the thermal plants
sit in air conditioning
twenty-four hours a day
so that even a trace of hot wind
never touches them.

But next to the thermal station,
amid the burning heat,
when we sit with our families to eat,
our food is covered in ash and dust.

Beating the stomachs
of innocent people,
destroying the places
where we live.
Is this right or wrong? Think.

மணலியில் இயங்கும்
ரசாயன தொழிற்சாலையில்
சிவப்பு நிற இராசயனம்
அதிகமாக இருக்கலாம்
எங்க மக்களின் இரத்தத்தை
திட்டமிட்டு அட்டை போல உறிஞ்சுவதால்

In the chemical factories of Manali,
there may be plenty
of red-colored chemicals;
perhaps because they deliberately suck
the blood of our people
like leeches.

அநியாயம் செய்யும் உங்கள் அதிகார கால்களின்
ஓர் க்கயிறு
தூக்குக்கயிறாகவும் இருக்கலாம்
எங்கள் உழைப்புகளை எடுத்துக்கொண்டு
எங்கள் வாழிடத்தை காலியிடமாக்கி
எங்கள் வாழ்வாதாரத்தை கொலைசெய்ய
நினைப்பதால்

The shoelaces
on the boots of your unjust authority
may one day become the hangman's rope.
Because you take our labor,
empty out our homeland,
and try to murder our livelihood.

பாம்புக்கும் கீறிக்கும் பகையில்ல,
ஆனாலும் ஈடுபடும் சண்டையில்
பாம்புக்கும் கழுக்குக்கும் பகையில்ல
ஆனாலும் ஈடுபடும் சண்டையில்
புலிக்கும் முதலைக்கும் பகையில்ல
ஆனாலும் ஈடுபடும் சண்டையில்
உங்களுக்கும் எங்களுக்கும் பகையில்ல
ஆனாலும் இருக்குறோம் நாங்க புகையில்

The snake and the mongoose are not enemies,
yet in fight they engage.
The snake and the eagle are not enemies,
yet they clash in battle.
The tiger and the crocodile are not enemies,
yet they fight in battle.
You and we are not enemies either,
yet we are forced to live in smoke.

உங்க போதைக்கு தேவை புகையலை(Tobacco)
போற பாதையே மறையுது புகையில்(smoke)
இது துண்டு சிகரெட்டு புகை இல்ல
நாங்க வாழறதே பெரும் புகைக்குள்ள
நாங்க பத்திரப்படுத்திவச்ச புதையல
நீ திருட வந்துப்பட்ட கதையில்

For your addiction, you need tobacco smoke;
for us, smoke itself hides the roads we walk.
This is not the smoke of a cigarette stub —
our whole lives are trapped inside a giant cloud of
smoke.
The treasure we carefully preserved,
you came to steal in this story.

தூச விடுற எங்க திசையில்
மாசனால கேன்சர் வந்துருச்சி தசையில்
வேற இடம் மாற தொகை இல்ல
நீ வேற இடம் மாறிக்க தொலைவுல

In every direction, dust rises.
Pollution has brought cancer into our flesh.
We do not have the means to move elsewhere —
perhaps you should be the ones to move far away.

Every aspect of the exhibition—the performances, poetry readings, and visits with community groups—gave a human face to reality while helping us remain afloat amid despair. This is the kind of creativity that sticks with us. In the days that follow, we continue to feel the reverberation. This is a haunting that we can individually handle and collectively tackle. Does that mean that a conventional collection of data is useless? Of course not. We need to learn from where we have been and seek closely for possibilities toward a wiser future. But as I learned from the individuals I met through the Pugai Padam Collective, our daily experience holds knowledge. And as the poets expressed, “When harm is visible in bodies, delay in action is not a choice.”

Here are links to two of the articles about their project:

[Praveena S A, “Three-day art exhibition at Nungambakkam throws light on city's deepening air Pollution,” New Indian Express \(Feb 16, 2026\)](#)
[Muskaan Ahmed, “Chennai-based art campaign reveals grim pollution truth; Residents confront air quality issues through creative expression,” Times of India \(Feb 10, 2026\)](#)